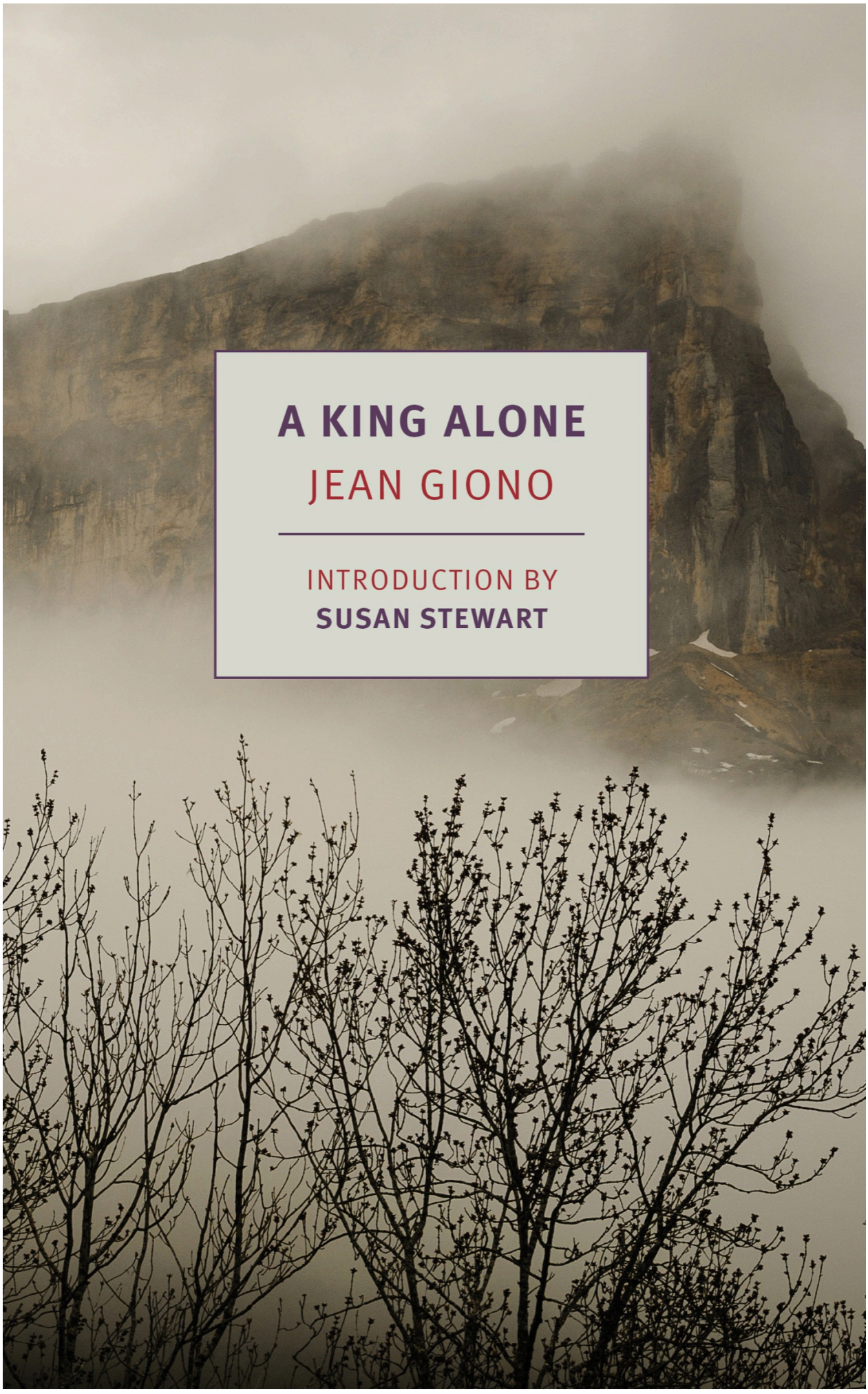
A KING ALONE
JEAN GIONO
INTRODUCTION BY
SUSAN STEWART

JEAN GIONO (1895–1970) was born and lived most of his life in the town of Manosque, Alpes-de-Haute-Provence. Largely self-educated, he started working as a bank clerk at the age of sixteen and reported for military service when World War I broke out. He saw action in several battles, including Verdun, and was one of only two members of his company to survive. After the war, he returned to his job and family in Manosque and became a vocal, lifelong pacifist. After the success of his first novel, *Hill*, which won the Prix Brentano, he left the bank and began to publish prolifically. During World War II, Giono's outspoken pacifism led some to accuse him, unjustly, of defeatism and of collaboration with the Nazis; after France's liberation in 1944, he was imprisoned and held without charges. Despite being blacklisted, Giono continued writing and achieved renewed success. He was elected to the Académie Goncourt in 1954.

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OTHER BOOKS BY JEAN GIONO
PUBLISHED BY NYRB CLASSICS

Hill
Translated by Paul Eprile
Introduction by David Abram

Melville
Translated by Paul Eprile
Introduction by Edmund White

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NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

New York

THIS IS A NEW YORK REVIEW BOOK
PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS
435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014
www.nyrb.com

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Cover image: © Erwann Fourmond, *Mont Aiguille, Chichilianne*, 2013; courtesy of the photographer
Cover design: Katy Homans

Published in French as *Un Roi sans divertissement*

Cet ouvrage, publié dans le cadre d'un programme d'aide à la publication, bénéficie de la participation de la Mission Culturelle et Universitaire Française aux Etats-Unis, service de l'Ambassade de France aux EU.

This work, published as part of a program of aid for publication, received support from the Mission Culturelle et Universitaire Française aux Etats-Unis, a department of the French Embassy in the United States.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Giono, Jean, 1895–1970, author. | Waters, Alyson, 1955–, translator.
Title: A king alone / by Jean Giono ; translated by Alyson Waters.
Other titles: Roi sans divertissement. English
Description: New York : New York Review Books, [2019] | Series: New York Review Books Classics.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018030552 (print) | LCCN 2018030941 (ebook) | ISBN 9781681373102 (epub) | ISBN 9781681373096 (alk. paper)
Classification: LCC PQ2613.I57 (ebook) | LCC PQ2613.I57 R613 2019 (print) | DDC 843/.912—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018030552

ISBN 978-1-68137-310-2
v1.0

For a complete list of titles, visit www.nyrb.com or write to:
Catalog Requests, NYRB, 435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

INTRODUCTION

ONE SUMMER evening at the turn of the millennium, by the edge of a field near Roussillon, an elderly farmer told me that after the devastation of World War I the local villagers replanted their truffle oaks, knowing they would have to wait at least twenty years for a harvest. But after the devastation of World War II, they despaired of planning and planting, and returned to foraging in the forests with their dogs.

Among those drafted into the Alpine infantry in late 1914 was the twenty-year-old bank clerk Jean Giono, son of an artisan cobbler and a laundress in the Haute-Provence village of Manosque. He emerged more than four years later, "*soldat de deuxieme classe, sans croix de guerre*." He had suffered the battles of Eparges, Verdun (where he was one of only a handful of survivors from his regiment), Chemin des Dames, and Kemmel. During a brief interlude in England, where he underwent treatment for gas exposure, he rescued a fellow patient—a blinded English officer—when the hospital caught fire. He was awarded a British medal, his only decoration.

Giono's autobiographical novel of 1932, *Jean le Bleu*, ends with this memory: "It was easy for me to go to war without much strong emotion, simply because I was young, and over all young men, a wind was blowing the scent of sails and pirates." The war left him a fervent, lifelong pacifist, and in 1939 his antiwar activism led to a three-month imprisonment at Marseilles. In 1945, at fifty, he was again imprisoned—this time accused of collaboration with the Vichy government because his writing had been published and his dramas produced during the Occupation. He was placed on a blacklist of writers. At the end of six months, he was acquitted and the public learned of his successful wartime efforts to shelter a number of victims of Nazi persecution.

In September and October of the following year, Giono wrote *A King Alone* (*Un Roi sans divertissement*), the story of a remote Alpine village tormented by a serial killer. The novel marks a departure from the pastoral tales of his early career, which were rooted in his love of Greek and Latin literature, and his 1941 homage to Herman Melville, *Melville* (published in the NYRB Classics series). *A King Alone* is the first of those novels Giono called his *chroniques*—designed not so much as histories as layered and unresolved narrations. These were to be "more recounted than written" and *A King Alone* is assembled from the words of a narrator who is recounting layers of reported speech. This is the technique of legends and of the game we call in English "Chinese whispers": repetitions inevitably resulting in distortions that open to the wishes and fantasies of even the most certain and rational of speakers. Giono had been reading detective novels from the popular Série noire imprint, and in *A King Alone* he creates a disconcerting atmosphere of both suspense and retrospection. We readers, like the villagers, are listeners, on edge and searching for clues, assembling patterns, anticipating catastrophes that happened many generations ago and yet continue to hold the villagers in thrall.

The novel's French title and closing words come from one of the most well-known pensées of Blaise Pascal: *Un roi sans divertissements est un homme plein de misères*. Pascal explains that a lonely king, with neither sensual nor spiritual resources, will succumb to melancholy, just as any ordinary person who grows dissatisfied with his own room, home, or neighborhood will "go to sea or to besiege a town." Pascal's pensée continually haunts this story where events that took place in 1843, '44, '45, and '46 are narrated eighty years or so later against the continuing backdrop of the French colonial war in Algeria. Giono subtly notes that the principal figures here—the police captain Langlois and the café owner and retired prostitute nicknamed Saucisse, which is translated here as "Sausage"—are each in their own way veterans of that war: Langlois in combat with the Algerian tribes led by Abd-el-Kader, Sausage through barracks "service" with its soldiers. The two, who while away the hours together in the café discussing "the ways of the world," are settlers in, not native to, the village, and they remain objects of fascination for their neighbors. Meanwhile, we follow Sausage's total preoccupation with Langlois, yet we know very little of Langlois's own thoughts.

As *A King Alone* begins, the narrator explains his place in the village and his belated detective work: "I say 'we'; naturally I wasn't there because all that happened in 1843, but I had to put my heart and soul into the whole thing and ask so many questions to get to the bottom of it that I ended up being part of it . . ." The narrator and the village remain unnamed, though they are surrounded at no great distance by real places in Haute-Provence: the towns of Chichilianne, Clelles, Mens, Prébois, Chirouzes, and Diois, and the city of Grenoble, the seat of state authority. Yet places less than a day's walk away might as well be another country, and the village, in its isolation, is bound by iron ties of mutual dependence and kinship. The narrator introduces us at the start to Frédéric, who took over the village sawmill from his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather—all Frédérics. He goes on to recount the genealogies of the village families and their intermarriages. Everyone is known; everyone accounted for.

The murderer, of course, must be a stranger. His initial is revealed to the reader in the opening pages: he will be known only as "Monsieur V." throughout. The narrator mentions two of the murderer's legendary predecessors: the eighteenth-century brigands Cartouche and Mandrin, the latter of whom had in his time been known as both "the terror of the *ferme générale* [the tax collecting agency of the ancien régime]" and a "king." And he tracks down some of Monsieur V.'s actual descendants. He mentions particularly a young man who is glimpsed reading Gérard de Nerval's *Sylvie* in the vicinity of Diois, some thirty kilometers or so distant. If the Algerian allusions and theme of arbitrary violence recall to us the contemporaneity of Albert Camus's 1942 *The Stranger*, Nerval's novella, published in the mid-nineteenth century at the time of his suicide, with its serial love affairs and strong contrasts of color, gives us another example of *A King Alone*'s own kinships.

Marie Chazottes disappears. The Ravanel son thwarts a kidnapping attempt. And the Ravanel family's pig is strangely mutilated by a sharp instrument that has been used to carve corkscrew and serpentine shapes into its hide, the sadistic "alphabet of some unknown, barbaric language." Next Bergues, a skilled tracker who had tried to follow the fleeing kidnapper, himself disappears. The remote situation of the village means that no one wants to venture across the winter landscape to report the crimes to the regional gendarmes—"one had to travel three leagues in solitude." Nevertheless, a posse departs and fetches six policemen, led by their captain: Langlois. The captain organizes the village to protect itself, but the murderous attacks continue. Each crime is known only by a horrific valence between appearance (blood in the snow) and disappearance (the utterly vanished victims). Langlois has the confidence of the townspeople, but it is Frédéric who will discover the corpses and the murderer. In a heart-pounding sequence of pages, he traces him through the "silence and solemnity" of the snow-covered forests and fields to his house in Chichiliane. Soon Langlois and his fellow policemen will surround the house and lead the murderer to his fate.

The novel's initial mystery is the motivation of the murderer. The narrator, continuing to think of the family lines of the villagers, suggests that the victims carried within their very blood a certain "liveliness and fire," and that this "blood was very beautiful. [. . .] Let's speak like a painter." He adds a thought about the comparable value of the blood of sets of characters and says,

> But then there is another way of looking that includes the first, according to which Abraham and Isaac proceed logically, one following the other, toward Mount Moriah; in which the obsidian knives of the priests of Quetzalcoatl logically drive deep into selected hearts. And it is through beauty that we come to know this. Impossible to live in a world believing that the sublime splendor of the guinea fowl's plumage is meaningless. Just as an aside. I wanted to say it. I have.

Blood, however, is not an aside. It is everywhere in the novel: in allusions to the bloodlines of the villagers, to Chrétien de Troyes's Perceval mesmerized by three drops of goose blood in the snow, to the gory evidence of the murders, to the very nickname Sausage—a euphemism for boudin (blood sausage), the disparaging slang term for an aged whore. And yet blood also is pulsing everywhere concealed: beneath human skin and clothing, under the pelts of animals and whatever survives beneath the winter snow.

Monsieur V.'s crimes gradually fade in relation to the story of Langlois's astonishing response to them, an act that, despite its obviously willed nature, he will claim is "an accident." This unfathomable action will dominate the remainder of the novel. Langlois will return to the village a year later, in 1846, bearing a new title: commander of the Louveterie (the Wolf-Hunting Corps). His commission places him at the highest rank of those officers, dating back to Charlemagne, who were charged with ridding the French forests of wolves. The villagers are amazed that he has decided to settle among them permanently and suspect he has been disgraced. But his friendship with the respected royal prosecutor and his cordial ties to the officials and upper-class families of nearby towns belie that possibility. In the meantime, he will be preoccupied with the welfare of the murderer's widow, who has retreated to Diois (where her *Sylvie*-reading descendant was found). And eventually, disastrously, he will enlist Sausage's help in finding a wife.

The primary diversion of the bored aristocrat is hunting for pleasure, and in *A King Alone*, Giono has Langlois organize a highly ceremonial wolf hunt. The ritual aspects of hunting—the music of the hunting horns, the choreography of the parties of men, the trained animals—are starkly set against the spectacle of the kill. Sausage and her friend Madame Tim attend, perched in a sled in their party dresses under warm blankets, and the excited hunters illumine the night with their torches. At the base of a sheer cliff, a true dead end, they will witness "a short, silent, secret meeting between the giver and the receiver of sudden death." The logic of sacrifice that the narrator had described earlier is linked explicitly to the rituals of communion; the gory serpentine and corkscrew decorations on the slain animals are evoked in

the embroideries of the chasubles; and, ultimately, the blood on the snow suggests the writer's marks on the white page. The ever mysterious Langlois, who states that no man is a monster, is himself a person of what seem to be compulsive repetitions. In the novel's final pages, we find him literally reenacting the gaze of Perceval, transfixed by drops of goose blood in the snow: soon a third ritualized death will bring the story to a shocking, paradoxical conclusion.

As the reader closes *A King Alone*, many images will remain: the snow as "thick, frozen dust from a world that must have exploded," the silent forests, the obdurate mountains. Yet one image will linger in particular: the magisterial beech, standing next to the sawmill, which appears on the first page of the novel. Outliving generation after generation, perhaps a witness to the region's history of atrocities from the Cathars to modern wars, the tree holds the secret of the serial deaths. Yet it endures beyond them, unharmed. The narrator tells us from the start that the beech is dedicated to Apollo Citharoedus, the lyre-carrying god of order, light, and inspiration. In the end, the great tree invites us to ask ourselves if human beings might share in its powers: "so simple [. . .] it knows itself and judges itself."

—SUSAN STEWART

THE TRANSLATOR would like to thank the Banff International Literary Translation Centre for providing a stretch of time and a beautiful environment to begin work on this translation. In particular at BILTC, Paul Gagné and Katie Silver gave me valuable input. In addition, thanks to Donald Nicholson-Smith and Emmanuelle Ertel for putting their heads together with me over some purely *Gionesque* conundrums. And thanks to Edwin Frank for taking on the editing of this King, making the translation richer and wiser.

—ALYSON WATERS

A KING ALONE

Let us leave a king all alone to reflect on himself quite at leisure, without any gratification of the senses, without any care in his mind, without society; and we will see that a king without diversion is a man full of wretchedness.

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*
(trans. W. F. Trotter)

If you'd send me your bagpipes, and all the other little trinkims belonging to it, I would put them in order, and play some melancholy tunes, well adapted, I might add, to my unpleasant situation as a prisoner.

—Letter from Audl-Reckie

FRÉDÉRIC owns the sawmill on the road to Avers. He took it over from his father, his grandfather, his great-grandfather—from all the Frédérics.

It's on the side of the road, exactly at the hairpin bend. There's a beech tree there; I'm sure there's none more magnificent anywhere. It's the Apollo Citharoedus of beech trees. There cannot possibly be another beech, anywhere at all, with skin so smooth and so beautiful a color, a more flawless build, more perfect proportions, with such nobility, grace, and eternal youth. Definitely "Apollo" is what you say the instant you catch sight of it, and you say it again and again for as long as you look at it. What is most extraordinary is that it's both beautiful and so simple. No question about it: it knows itself and judges itself. How can such perfection not have a consciousness, when all it takes is a puff of north wind, an unfortunate shift of evening light, an odd tilt to its leaves for its beauty, defeated, to lose all its power to awe?

•

In 1843, '44, and '45, Monsieur V. used this beech quite a bit. Monsieur V. was from Chichiliane, a commune about twenty kilometers from here by a twisted road, at the bottom of a deep valley. No one goes there, they go elsewhere, to Clelles (in the other direction), to Mens, or to countless other places even farther away, but not to Chichiliane. What would a person do there were he to go? What is there to do in Chichiliane? Nothing. It's just like here. Elsewhere, too, of course; but elsewhere, whether to the east or the west, there can be things to discover, copses, crossroads. Twenty-one kilometers in 1843 was far, just over five leagues, and if you went out it was wearing a smock and boots on a plodding hinny. So Chichiliane was no ordinary destination.

I don't think there are any V.'s left in Chichiliane. The family hasn't died out, but there's no one named V. anymore—neither the café owner nor the grocer—and no one by that name appears on the plaque of the monument to the dead.

There are some V.'s farther along, if you climb up to the Menet pass (the road takes you through masses of greenery in the midst of which you can make out more than a hundred huge or very beautiful beech trees, but none comparable to the beech near Frédéric's sawmill), if you go down the Diois hillside, well, yes, there you'll find some V.'s. The third farm to the right of the road, in the meadows, has a fountain with a spout made from two interlocking roof tiles; there are hollyhocks in a small parish garden and, if it's summer, or even Easter vacation (but then there could still be frost in the vicinity), you might be able to see, sitting at the foot of the hollyhocks, a young man, very dark, thin, with a sprinkling of beard, all tending to exaggerate the size of his eyes, which are already very wide and lost in thought. Usually (well, when I saw him), he reads; he was reading Gérard de Nerval's *Sylvie*. He's a V. He is (well, he was) at the *école normale* in Valence, or was it Grenoble? And reading *Sylvie* in that spot is quite odd. You cross under that pass through a tunnel about as "passable" as the former gallery of an abandoned mine, and the Diois hillside on which you emerge up there is a chaotic mix of monstrous whale-blue waves and black jet sprays spurting pine trees onto I don't know what—an ugly, pinkish rock face, or one that is an insidious gray like the shells of large mollusks; well, the terrestrial equivalent of immense, colliding dark bodies of water that in the midst of a churning cyclone reveal an immeasurable depth. This is why I said that *Sylvie*, in such a spot, is rather odd because not only is the farm, called the Chirouzes, extremely isolated but its curved walls, its roof, and the way its doors and windows are hidden among huge flying buttresses all make it clear that it is afraid. There are no trees around. All the farm can do is hide in the ground and it's plain to see that it's doing just that with all its might: the pastureland behind is higher than the roof. The parish garden is there, just off to the side, fenced in by wire, I believe, and the hollyhocks are there, who knows why, and V. (Amédée), the son, is there, in front of it all. He's reading *Sylvie*, by Gérard de Nerval. He was reading *Sylvie* by Gérard de Nerval when I saw him. I didn't see his father or mother; I don't know if he has brothers or sisters; all I know is that he's a V., that he's studying at the *école normale* in Valence or Grenoble, and that he comes back home during school holidays.

I don't even know if he's related to, or a descendent of, that V. from 1843. His is the only family with that name anywhere near Chichiliane.

I never could find out exactly what the one from 1843 was like. No one could tell me if he was tall or short. I imagine him with a beard, a bit like the beard of the young man reading Nerval, very brown,

stiff, bristly, but somewhat sparse, and through which one can almost make out the shape of his chin. Not a nice beard, but a beard—I don't quite know how to put it—a necessary, indispensable beard. Was he tall? Goodness, he might have been short but in that case he must have been stocky, and surely he had great physical strength.

I asked my friend Sazerat from Prébois about him. Sazerat has written four or five pamphlets about the regional history of this part of Trièves. In his personal library I found a big illustrated book about Cartouche and Mandrin and werewolves with their different snouts all portrayed in it (not a single canine is missing). There are portraits of two or three stranglers of shepherdesses and lots of documentation about someone named Brachet, a notary from Saint-Baudille who, they say, "stole from the till to please some grand-society dame," but about my V. from 1843, nothing, not a word.

Nonetheless, Sazerat knows the story. Everyone knows it. You just have to bring it up yourself; otherwise no one will discuss it. Sazerat told me, "It's a question of tact. He was considered deranged, crazy. We just try to keep the thing hushed up. We know enough about ourselves to be sure we won't be stopping buses on the road from one day to the next, but not enough to be sure that, someday, we might not go too far. So it's best not to talk about those things, best not to draw attention to them."

I said, "Oh, please! You're not telling me everything."

"Of course I am," he said. "What would I be hiding?"

Obviously. He's a historian. He hides nothing; he interprets. What happened is more interesting. I think.

•

'43 (1843, obviously). December. Winter had come on so early and so fast that it seemed never to have left. Every day a cold north wind, the clouds gathering in the horseshoe formed by the mountains L'Archat, Le Jocond, La Plainie, Le Mont des Patres, and L'Avers. The clouds that were already dark in October were joined by the even darker clouds of November, then on top of them came those of December, dark and dense. Everything piles up on us; nothing moves. Green at first, the light turns the color of hare innards, then an extraordinary black that, black as it is, has shadows of deep purple. A week ago you could still see the shepherd's hut on Le Jocond, the edge of the pine forest, the clearing with gentians, a bit of meadow that sits up there. Then the clouds hid it all. So. At first you could still see Préfleuri and the tree trunks tossed out after the cutting, but then the clouds dropped even more and hid Préfleuri and those tree trunks. So. The clouds stopped along the road that goes up to the pass. You could see the maples and the 12:15 stagecoach for Saint-Maurice. There was no snow yet, and people were hurrying to get over the pass in both directions. You could still easily make out the inn (the building is now called "Texaco" because the company has placed ads on its walls), you could see the inn and all the horses that were there to back up the steam drays that were rushing to get across while the road was still passable. The cabriolet from the firm of Colomb and Bernard, hardware dealers from Grenoble, was visible. It was coming down from the pass. Whenever that one returned, you knew that soon the pass would be blocked. Then the clouds covered the road, Texaco, and everything else; they dribbled down onto Bernard's meadows and the quickset hedge; and though this morning you can still see the twenty or twenty-five houses in the village each with its thick bar of purple shadow beneath the awnings, you can no longer see the arrow atop the steeple's weathervane because a cloud has sliced it off directly above the South, North, East, West markings.

The snow begins to fall just after. By noon, everything is covered, everything is erased, there is no world, no sound, nothing. Dense vapors run along the rooftops and cloak the houses; the flutter of falling snow tints the dark windows a cool, blood-rose in which you can see the metronome of a hand wiping the frost from the pane; then a cruel, emaciated face appears, looking out.

All those faces—whether of men, women, or children—wear fake beards fashioned out of the darkness of the rooms from which they emerge, beards of black raffia that devour their mouths. They all look like priests of the Feathered Serpent, even the Catholic priest, despite the ORA PRO NOBIS inscribed on the lintel over his window.

One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock; the snow continues to fall. Four o'clock; night; fires are lit in the hearths. Five o'clock, six, seven; lamps are lit: it is snowing. Outside there is no longer earth nor sky, neither village nor mountain; nothing but a crumbling heap of thick, frozen dust from a world that must have exploded. A room in which the fire has gone out is uninhabitable. Everything is uninhabitable, that is, there's no longer any place to imagine a peacock-colored world, except bed. And even then, huddling under blankets in twos, threes, fours, or sometimes fives. Who could imagine that bodies could be so vast? Why would Chichiliane have come to mind?

And yet, it was precisely Chichiliane.

One day, two days, three days, twenty days of snow, until about the sixteenth of December. No one knows the exact date, but in the evening of the fifteenth, sixteenth, or seventeenth, Marie Chazottes was not to be found.

"What do you mean 'was not to be found'?"

"She disappeared."

"What on earth are you saying?"

"Vanished as of three o'clock in the afternoon. At first we thought she'd gone to a friend's house, but no. Or perhaps to another friend's, but no. No one saw her anywhere."

The next day, through snow still falling thick and fast, Bergues is visible passing by on his snowshoes; he goes down by the Protestant cemetery, toward Adrets. Another man is seen going up toward La Plainie by the goat path, and a third rushes off to Saint-Maurice. From there, after searching the valleys, he goes to get the gendarmes.

For Marie Chazottes has indeed disappeared. She left her house at about three in the afternoon, wearing nothing warmer than a scarf; her mother even had to remind her to put on her clogs; she was heading out in slippers because, she said, she was just going to the shed on the other side of the barn. She went around the corner of the wall and, since then, nothing.

Some say . . . but of course there are countless stories, while the snow goes on falling the entire month of December.

Marie Chazottes was twenty or twenty-two years old. It's hard to know what she looked like because around here, when they say "a beautiful woman" they mean "a fat woman." Beautiful? You need fat calves, fat thighs, a big bosom, and to be light on your feet; that's beautiful. Otherwise, why waste your time. You might go as far as to say "She's not bad" or "She's pretty," but never "She's beautiful."

Now that I think about it, Raoul's mother-in-law is a Chazottes. She's even the daughter of the aunt of our Marie from '43, an aunt younger than her niece, very common in these parts. So, there you have it: that woman, and therefore also Raoul's wife, is a Chazottes. Little Marcel Pugnet is too, by his mother who was the sister of Raoul's mother-in-law. And the Dumonts, they're Chazottes as well, by the daughter of the first cousin of Raoul's mother-in-law.

In fact, the Dumonts are very handsome men, without a doubt (true, men are not judged in the same way as women). Everyone agrees, in Saint-Maurice, Avers, and Prébois. Their build, their blue eyes, their gait, their friendliness and willingness to help: they've got everything going for them. They have a very pretty nose, the same nose you'll find on little Marcel, along with the blue eyes. The Dumonts, the Pugnets, and Raoul's wife all have brown hair, a brown rare in these parts: very dark and shiny. And Raoul's wife, even with the work she does, always outside and in the fields, is still very pale. Not suntanned like everyone else. Her upper arms, which you can see through the sleeves of her blouse, have stayed as white as milk. The Dumonts are really pale, not ruddy or tanned, even though they're in perfect health. This is how we can, perhaps, imagine Marie Chazottes: a little brunette with blue eyes, white as milk, lively and shapely, like Raoul's wife.

All those descendants I just mentioned and who can be seen living today are decent people, perhaps even a bit austere. Likewise, in 1843, no one had thought for a minute that Marie Chazottes could have *run off*. A gendarme used those words, but he was from the Graisivaudan valley. Anyway, *run off* with whom? All the boys from the village were still there. And everyone knew she wasn't *seeing* anyone. And when her mother had called her back to put on her clogs, she'd been going out in her slippers. So if that was *running off*, it was running off with an angel!

No one talked about an angel, but almost. That is, when Bergues and the two other poachers, who knew what they were doing (and knew, too, every nook and cranny where someone could get lost), came back empty-handed, mention was made of the devil. In fact, people talked about him so much that the following Sunday the priest gave a sermon on the subject. There were only some meddling old women to listen; people went out as little as possible. The priest said the devil was an angel, a dark angel but an angel nonetheless. Meaning that if the devil had had something he'd wanted to do with Marie Chazottes, he would have gone about it differently. He has plenty of women among his clientele, but they don't disappear; on the contrary. If the devil had wanted to bother with Marie Chazottes, he wouldn't have carried her off. He would have . . .

Just then they heard a gunshot outside and two screams. The snow hadn't stopped falling just because it was Sunday, quite the contrary, and the morning was so dark that the light at ten o'clock mass was exactly like the light at the end of vespers.

"Don't move," said the priest to his ten or twelve old women suddenly chilled to the bone.

He climbed down from the pulpit, made his assistant priest go hide in a confessional, and went to open the door. He was a handsome man. Even when the door was wide open, his burliness blocked the

doorway. The church square was deserted.

"What's going on?" he cried loudly enough to be heard by the people he could barely make out through the snow and the windows of the Café de la Route. The people came out of the café and said they had no idea.

"Well, get over here," said the priest. "You can see I'm wearing a surplice and my shoes have buckles. I've women here who need someone to accompany them home."

It was while he was accompanying the Martoune woman home that Bergues and two other fellows who'd been having a drink at the café came upon the astounded little group gathered around the man who had just fired the shot. His name was Ravanel, and his name lived on (like all the other names I'm mentioning) because his role in the tragedy turned out to be more complicated than the gunshot that interrupted the priest's sermon about the devil. The priest was right. This wasn't about the devil. This was much more worrisome.

The Martoune woman lives in the Pelousères neighborhood, right on the corner near the Fagot bakery, on a paved street that turns into a small road, then a footpath up to the Black Woods. A very charming neighborhood of detached houses separated by tiny vegetable and flower gardens. At the time of this story, because it was winter and one of the harshest ever, the snow had been falling nonstop for a month and had blanketed the gardens; each house looked like it had been set up twenty meters apart on a single, pure white steppe.

There, in front of his own barn, stood Ravanel—dazed and trembling with anger—with two of his closest neighbors. And after Bergues, showing great presence of mind, had taken the rifle that still had a bullet to go from his hands, this is what he said.

"I said to the young fellow" ("the young fellow" was Ravanel Georges, at the time twenty years old and, to judge by the Ravanel who drives trucks today and who is the grandson of this famous Georges, he must have been a rather fat young fellow) "I said to the young fellow, 'Go check on the piglets.' There were some suspicious noises (you'll soon understand why). Out he went. He turned the corner, there, just three meters away. Luckily, I'd stayed by the door looking out the window in it. He turns the corner. He'd just gone around it when I hear him scream. I go out. I round the corner. I find him lying on the ground. Two seconds and, up there, between the Richauds' house and the Pelouses', I saw a man go by, running toward Gari's barn. I got my gun quick and fired at him as he was climbing up toward the little chapel. And there, he disappeared down the sunken lane."

Georges was brought home. He was all right and now he was drinking a bit of hyssop liqueur. And this is what he said.

"I turned the corner. I didn't see a thing. Not a thing. Someone covered my head with a scarf and tossed me on his back like a sack, took a few steps, and was carrying me away. He was carrying me away! But when he was putting the scarf over my face, I lowered my head so that when I got lifted up, instead of the scarf smothering me, it didn't smother me completely because I could still shout. So he dropped me fast, and I heard Father saying, '*Capounas*! The scoundrel!' Then Father shot his rifle."

He hadn't made it all the way to the pigsties where the tumult was still going on. They went to find out what was happening, and what they discovered was rather unsavory. One of the pigs was covered in blood. No one had tried to slit its throat, which would have been understandable. The pig had been slashed all over, more than a hundred gashes that were probably made with a knife as sharp as a razor. Most of these gashes were not straight, but corkscrewed or serpentine, curved, arced across the pig's whole skin, and very deep. You could tell they'd been made with pleasure.

That was incomprehensible! So incomprehensible, so disgusting (Ravanel was rubbing the animal with snow and, no sooner had he got him clean than you saw the blood oozing back out and trace what looked like the alphabet of some unknown, barbaric language), so immediately threatening that Bergues, ordinarily so calm and so philosophical, burst out: "Damn bastard. I've got to get him." And he went to fetch his snowshoes and shotgun.

But between what there is to do and what gets done! . . . At dusk, Bergues came back empty-handed. He'd followed tracks, bloody ones. The man had been wounded. There were drops of blood, very fresh, pure on the snow. And because the footprints were normal, quick and light, the man must have been wounded in the arm. In fact, Bergues had been quick himself; he'd followed the tracks barely half an hour after they'd been made; he is the fastest walker in the village and he had his snowshoes and his anger too; he had everything but he couldn't see anything apart from that clear trail, those perfect stains of fresh blood on the virgin snow. The trail went straight through the Black Woods and then came right up against the very steep slope of Le Jocond and got lost in the clouds. Yes, in the clouds. There's no mystery there, no trick to suggest that some sort of god, a half, whole, or quarter god, was involved. Bergues was a straight shooter. If he said that the bloody tracks got lost in the clouds it means, literally,

that they got lost in the clouds, that is, in the clouds covering the mountain. Don't forget that the sky was still overcast and that, while I've been telling you all this, the cloud is still slicing the weathervane arrow atop the steeple in two.

Suddenly there was no more talk of Marie Chazottes this, Marie Chazottes that! It wasn't just Marie Chazottes but also Ravanel Georges (he'd escaped by a hairsbreadth), and therefore also you or me, anyone and everyone, the whole village was threatened! And an exceedingly dark Sunday night was beginning to fall on it. The people who had no shotguns (there are widows with families) spent a truly miserable night. In fact, those families in which there were very young children and no men went to spend the night in houses where there were solid men and weapons. Especially in the Pelousères neighborhood.

Bergues kept watch and spent the night going from house to house. So many snifters and glasses of mulled wine had warmed him that he returned royally plastered. He played the commanding officer tirelessly, knocking on all the doors, scaring the wits out of roomfuls of women and children and even men who, since nightfall, had been holding their breath and watching the paint dry. Twenty times he almost got a faceful of buckshot. At last, drunk as a skunk, he stayed the night at Ravanel's, while Ravanel, having finished off the poor pig, spent his time making it into sausages and black pudding in order to take his mind off things and, chiefly, so as not to waste anything.

You have to forgive Bergues, a bachelor who's a bit wild; he doesn't really know how to control himself in matters of drink or anything else, but at Ravanel's, either from excitement, exhaustion, or alcohol, he began to say some strange things; for example, "blood, blood on snow, so clean, red and white, it was very beautiful." (I am thinking of the sleeping, hypnotized Perceval: Opium? Tobacco? The aspirin of the century of the bourgeois aviator hypnotized by the blood of wild geese on the snow.)

This little *unmooring* of Bergues's, who immediately afterwards, by the way, became the placid, pipe-smoking philosopher Bergues again, even somewhat more lethargic than usual, went unnoticed at first; those who were there and who would remember it in the end, simply and instinctively made a mental note of it. In any event, there was one thing that the village could not ignore and the full significance of which became extremely clear the next day: while the snow continued to fall (it was an awful winter), everyone remained under the same threat.

As I said, it was no longer Marie Chazottes this or that; there had been Ravanel Georges, the scarf around the face, the footprints going up Le Jocond into the clouds; there had been that . . . oh, yes! that man skulking about on that infamous Sunday morning around ten o'clock, looking (for what, exactly?), and who, after all, had spent his time in a very unsavory way with Ravanel's pig before trying to snatch our Georges.

No one doubted it for a second! Marie Chazottes had been snatched with the scarf. Strangling Georges could prove difficult, as we've seen (though it was a close call), but our Marie? Two pinches of pepper, light as a feather, and who could turn a waltz on a small plate, dust! It must have happened in the twinkling of an eye.

Once his jag had passed, Bergues went home. Widows or no widows, you still had to go home. The first night is fine, but you can't camp out at other people's places forever. If people are afraid, they need to stuff a rock in their pocket. And people were afraid.

From time to time the snow stops falling. The cloud lifts. Instead of slicing the weathervane just below the arrow, it now slices it only at the tip, or even reveals the tip, breaking up into little flakes on the point. Enough. You can see the extraordinarily white desert all the way to the edge of the extraordinarily dark woods, in which there could be anything, anything capable of anything. Night falls. A slight wind stirs that no one hears. What people do hear is something like a hand brushing against the shutters, the door, or the wall; a moaning or a whistling like a lament, or its opposite. A noise in the attic.

Everyone is listening. Father is no longer pulling on his pipe. Mother holds her handful of salt suspended above the soup. They look at each other. At us. Father lets out a sigh, dispelling a wisp of smoke with it. We need the noise to start up again. We are on the lookout, so that we can evaluate the noise in an instant: dangerous or not. But nothing, only silence. We don't know. Indecision. Anything's possible. We can't tell. Father's wisp of smoke grows longer and longer. Grain by grain, Mother drops her cooking salt into the soup: plop, plop, plop.

The shotgun is on the table. Mother raises her hand above the pot and the whole handful of salt slides into the soup. It's five o'clock. Another seventeen hours to wait before a gray dawn appears. Outside, a supple stirring. Long willow branches freeing themselves of the weight of the snow? Usually you can tell. Could it be? . . . Is it? . . . Yes? No? No. Snow gently fluttering down again, a quivering in the thatch, the muffled crunch of footsteps in straw.

Jewel stamps her feet in the cowshed, ah! The animals have to be fed. Leave the woman alone. Go

down below alone. If only the lad were twenty . . . and even so, what good would it do? Georges was twenty. You would need two or three strapping boys. He says, “Come, let’s go feed the horse.” It’s just down below. You get there by an indoor stairway.

It’s the hour when the horses in the stables all stamp their feet. Here, Mother lights the lantern. Next door, another woman; farther along, another. In all the houses people are beginning to stir to feed the animals. A sort of commotion groans through the walls with the sounds of feet shuffling and lanterns jingling, like suddenly very comforting words.

Here, just as next door, just as up and down the entire street, just as throughout the little streets of the entire village, just as in all those detached houses in the Pelousères neighborhood, the huge stables are vaulted, all touching one another, pressing against each other, not only with their pillars but also with their main walls, the keystones that slot together vault after vault without niggling about who the owner is: Tom, Dick, or Harry; but throughout the entire village there is an underground mingling of noises from bridles, stall partitions, bleating, horseshoes, pitchforks, water buckets, sweatings, troughs, words, names of animals—Jewel, Racer, Rusty, Gray Girl—all with the good feeling that being surrounded by vaulted caves gives to human things. These caves were the first armor and this evening they provide magnificent protection. Yes, one would need many children, male children, and big males at that, and one would need to dwell in these vaulted stables, these caves where one feels completely sheltered; not in those straight walls up there, those corners like cardboard, so unsolid, so unserious, so very 1843, so modern; while outside in the time that is not modern but eternal, eternal threats roam. What’s good is the vault, the warmth of the animals, the smell of the animals, the sound of the jaw chewing straw: seeing the big beautiful bellies of placid beasts. It’s here, truly, that it feels like family and humanity; Father has left his rifle leaning against the stall, and Mother strokes little sister’s hair.

(And too bad for the people who don’t understand and say, “They are oafs, sodbusters.” Sooner or later, life will see to making them understand. There are plenty of scarf-wielding killers out there, slicers of blood hieroglyphs; plenty of 1843 winters; plenty of seasons, months, days, hours, minutes, seconds, and even hundredths of seconds with *names* that will suddenly turn not only their minds but also their sorry asses into *sod*. At last they will understand, without it having to be spelled out for them, that nothing has ever been or ever will be invented that is better than a vault. While all around the nakedness and the solitude, the prowler prowls.)

But they had to go back up. The peddler may come only once a year, but he leaves enough twopenny *Veillée des Chaumières* papers that even here everyone knows about Marshal Prim, Garibaldi, and the demands of freedom. Already, everywhere, one cannot remain ignorant of one’s time. One must prefer fear to the vault.

Once again the shotgun is placed within reach on the table, next to the soup bowl. The shutters are closed, the door barricaded. You can’t see the night. All you know is that it’s snowing again. You breathe as quietly as possible so not to miss any of the sounds the rest of the world is making, to be able to interpret them, know whence they come: if it’s the willow branch cracking now beneath a new freeze; if it’s the paper pasted over a broken windowpane that’s thrumming or banging; if it’s the latch shivering, a girder moaning, rats scampering.

Another fifteen hours to wait.

Naturally, waiting . . . waiting . . . spring comes. Same as always. Spring arrived. You know how it is: a gray season, pastures like fox fur, eggshell snow on the pines, sudden rays of sun the color of oil, winds that cut like sheet metal, water, mud, runoff, every path shiny like slug slime. The days grow longer and one evening (already it stays light until six o’clock) all it takes is a puff of north wind for one to hear, like a sizzling, the sounds of the schools letting out in Saint-Maurice: all those children released into the golden light and the air bubbling like seltzer water.

The tip of the steeple above the weathervane had been visible again for quite some time; visible again were Bernard’s meadows, the clearings, La Plainie, Le Jocond. Again one could see that though the trails that ascend Le Jocond might be steep, they do not reach the clouds: there is sky. A lovely, gentian-colored sky, more and more spotless every day, smoother every day, covering more and more of the villages, the mountainsides, the tangle of peaks and ridges. Perhaps even a bit too much sky . . .

Marie Chazottes! Obviously one thought about her, but there’s everything else. One thought about her because she hadn’t been found. The truth is, if she had been found, she would have been buried in the cemetery; that is, one would have thought about her for an entire day, once and for all, as it should be, and afterwards, come what may, all would be as it should be. But Bergues, no matter how he roamed about, inspecting, and even sniffing as soon as it turned a little warmer: nothing. The little valleys, isolated or not, smelled of holy grass, hay, and curds.

So she had to be mourned. Mourned by Mother Chazottes in any case, who no longer knew how to act.

Where to take the flowers? What to do? What to do to what? Where was Marie? Whether on a journey, at her cousin's, somewhere else, or working as a servant in Grenoble, it was all the same! That's what Mother Chazottes seemed to be saying with her flabbergasted expression and her dangling arms as she was faced with spring that, this time around, gave nothing up (as it often does when people go missing in winter). All kidding aside, Mother Chazottes was being eaten alive by an unprecedented grief, and no one could console her.

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Now we need to speak about one of the Frédérics. The grandfather. Let's call him Frédéric II, because the sawmill began working with Frédéric I and continued under Frédéric II, Frédéric III, and now, Frédéric IV. Let's talk about the second one.

He took advantage of spring to clean out his reaches, which smelled. He climbed a hundred meters above the wheel, diverted the canal into the mountain stream, and, with his two Piedmontese bulls, began to mow the grasses and shovel huge cakes of black mud that reeked to high heaven. But he had no fear of odors.

"You're stinking us out," Bergues said to him.

"Ah! What do you expect, it has to be done," answered Frédéric II.

And, amazingly, it was Frédéric II and Bergues who said (was it the one or the other who said it first? did they say it together?), "It's nothing but manure. You should, or I should, put some at the base of the beech tree. It will do it good."

They thought of the beech tree very naturally because it was (and still is) near the canal. And especially because it was the most beautiful beech tree ever seen.

In the spring, it's a god! With its thick coat of buds covering it like the hide of one of those great golden bulls from the time before the vaults.

And they piled up that stinking mud against the base of the beech; all four of them: the two Piedmontese bulls, Frédéric II, and my man Bergues, who was lent a shovel. So much for the two bulls, about whom we shall never speak again; as for Frédéric II and my man Bergues, take note. Take note of what they did in that spring of 1844, during the first warm weather, when all the small valleys smell of holy grass; after that winter of '43 during which Marie Chazottes was the first to disappear.

The summer was a stormy one. One storm in particular was so sudden and violent that the water flooding into the well-cleaned canal almost carried off the sawmill paddle wheel. And one day when the thunder had again begun to roar, as soon as the raindrops started to pelt the ground like coins, Frédéric II ran up to the sluice gate to divert the water into the drainage canal. He'd just had the time to take care of his business and started running back through the already very heavy squalls, thickets of lightning, and dense shadows when he noticed a man taking shelter beneath the beech. He shouted at him to come in, but the man didn't seem to hear. It's childish; you don't take shelter under a tree during a storm, especially not a tree with the stature and span of that divine beech, and especially not during one of the storms around here, which are terrifyingly violent. Nonetheless, from the shelter of his shed, Frédéric II could see that *unnatural* man leaning against the trunk of the beech in a very peaceful, even carefree way; in a kind of obvious contentment as if he were warming his spats by the kitchen fireplace. Frédéric said to himself, "He's some poor chump from who knows where." He was thinking of those peddlers who come here during summer to restock farm equipment and hawk their new machines. Finally, since the storm was only growing fiercer, water streaming down the walls, a few thunderclaps having exploded close by, he said to himself, "It's crazy to leave that guy over there. Can't he see there's shelter over here?" Placing a sack on his head like a hood, he ran to the tree, took the man by the arm, and said, "Come on, you brainsick fool!" He pulled at him, and it was high time. Ears ringing from the storm, they fled the first shed and went straight to the gear shed.

"Well! See what I mean?" said Frédéric II.

"Yes indeed," said the man.

"Hey, where are you from?" said Frédéric II.

"Chichiliane," said the man.

At the time, you know, Chichiliane or Marseille, or the pope—it's all the same. And later, Chichiliane is not much either, because maybe in Chichiliane people are a little stupider than they are here; that's generally the case. For Frédéric II that was enough to explain why the man had stayed under the beech. Because the man had in fact heard the first call; he said so quite frankly. Also, he'd seen the sawmill shed ten meters behind him: he wasn't blind. But, you know, there are timid people and even stupid people. Frédéric II thought the man was stupid.

You've never had the chance to see Frédéric II's portrait? There's one at Frédéric IV's place. Right away

you can see he's a man who believes in the stupidity of others.

He didn't question the man from Chichiliane; he only wondered if his sluice gate would hold. He didn't look at him either. Yet for more than an hour they stayed crouched in the tiny gear shed, so close that their shoulders and arms touched.

Afterwards we had beautiful weather. I say "we"; naturally I wasn't there because all that happened in 1843, but I had to put my heart and soul into the whole thing and ask so many questions to get to the bottom of it that I ended up being part of it; and besides, I imagine it was one of those sumptuous falls you and I know.

I suppose you know where fall begins? It begins exactly 235 paces from the tree marked M 312; I've counted.

Have you been up the La Croix pass? See that trail that goes to Lake Lauzon? At the spot where it crosses the mountain-goat meadow, the slope is very steep; you pass by two fairly ugly crevasses of fallen rocks; you come up the vertical western face of Le Ferrand. It's a mineral landscape, perfectly telluric: gneiss, porphyry, sandstone, serpentine, rotting schist. Sharp crags cutting off every vista, the jagged peaks of Lus, canines, molars, incisors, dog teeth, lion teeth, tiger teeth, carnivorous fish teeth. From there, on your left, a trail toward the narrow chimneys in the side of Le Ferrand: skiing, panoramas. To your right, barely perceptible tracks in the pulverized rock covered with diatomaceous earth. Follow those tracks around the escarpment and, in the hollow like a glazed earthenware bowl, you'll find the highest forest squaring, maybe two hundred trees with, on the northern edge, an ash tree marked at least M 312. And right there, some 235 paces away, stuck directly in the sloping bowl, there's another ash tree. That's where fall begins.

It's instantaneous. Was there some watchword uttered last night while you had your back to the sky as you stirred your soup? This morning, you open your eyes and see my ash tree with a plume of golden parrot feathers on its skull. By the time you've made your coffee and gathered up everything you scatter around you when you sleep outside, it's not just a single plume but a whole helmet fashioned out of the rarest feathers: pink, gray, rust. Then it's slings, belts, and straps, lanyards, epaulettes, aprons, and breastplates that the tree hangs from himself and sticks everywhere on him; and all this is made out of the most gleaming ruby red that the world has to offer. Well, there he is decked out in his armor, done up in all the trimmings of a warrior priest, rattling his little noisemakers of dry wood.

Not to be outdone, the M 312 ash dons amices, honey-colored cassocks, bishops' albs, blazon-covered stoles, and playing-card kings. The larch trees cover themselves in capuchins and shepherd's cloaks of marmot fur; the maples put on red gaiters, slip on Zouave pantaloons, envelop themselves in executioners' capes, and cover their heads with Borgia berets. And by the time all that's done, the mountain-goat meadows are already blue with autumn crocuses. On the way back, when you reach the top of the La Croix pass, you find yourself face-to-face with the first sunset of the season, a kaleidoscope of crazy colors streaking the sky walls; next you see, down below, a grassy hollow that was nothing but hay when you went by two or three days ago, and now it has become a bronze crater guarded by Indians, Aztecs, blood kneaders, gold beaters, ocher miners, popes, cardinals, bishops, knights of the forest; mixed in are tiaras, bonnets, helmets, skirts, painted flesh, embroidered cloths, fall foliage, ash trees, beech trees, maples, shadberries, elms, larch trees, sycamores, oaks, and the black-green of the fir trees that ennobles all the other colors.

From then on the great walls of the sky will be painted evening after evening with colors that facilitate our acceptance of cruelty and free the ritual sacrificers from any and all remorse. Daubed in purple, the west bleeds on the rocks; they are incontestably more gorgeous when washed in blood than when a summer evening coats them a satiny pink or a pretty azure at the hour when Venus looks as delicate as a grain of barley. Pale green, violet, stains of sulfur, and even sometimes, where the light is brightest, a handful of plaster, while the three other walls of the sky cram together to form compact blocks of a night that is no longer smooth and shiny but suspect, condensed into enigmatic structures: such are the subjects of meditation that the monastery frescoes of the mountains offer us to contemplate. While in the shadow, the trees are tireless as they shake their tiny rattles of dry wood.

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The sawmill beech had not yet reached, of course, the magnitude it has today. But in its youth (well, at least in relation to today), or more accurately its adolescence, it was already of a stature and fabric that placed it head and shoulders above the other trees, even all the other trees combined. Its foliage was thick and bushy, dense as stone; its trunk (which could not be seen, covered as it was with small impenetrable branches) must have been of a rare strength and beauty to bear so much accumulated weight with such grace. And it was (at the time) filled to the brim with birds and flies; it had as many

birds and flies as leaves. Crows, rooks, swarming things plowed into it and shook it continually; at every moment it released splashes of nightingales and titmouses and vapors of wagtails and bees; it breathed out falcons and gadflies; it juggled multihued balls of finches, gold-crests, robins, plovers, and wasps. All around it was an endless dance of birds, butterflies, and bugs; and the sun seemed to break up into rainbows through bursts of sea spray. And in fall, with its long crimson strands, its thousand arms entwined with green serpents, its hundred thousand hands of golden foliage playing with feathered pom-poms, strings of birds, and crystal dust, it was no longer really a tree. The forests, seated on the mountain terraces, ended up staring at it in silence. It crackled like an inferno; it danced as only supernatural beings know how to dance, its body proliferating around its immobility; it swayed in a twisting of scarves, so quivering, so bronze, so indefatigably remolded by the euphoria of its body that you could no longer tell if it was anchored by the clinging of its prodigious roots or by the miraculous speed of the tip of the spinning top on which the gods take their rest. The forests, sitting on the bleachers of the mountain amphitheater in their grand priestly vestments, no longer dared to move. That masterful beauty was as hypnotizing as the eye of a snake or the blood of wild geese on snow. And all along the roads that went up to or came down from that beauty, a procession of maples stained with blood like butchers fell in line.

Which did not prevent the winter of 1844 from arriving; on the contrary. And Bergues disappeared. He wasn't missed right away. He was a bachelor and no one could say exactly when the world noticed his disappearance. He was a poacher; he hunted the most improbable things; he loved nature; he was sometimes absent for a week. But, in the winter of '44, people began to worry after four or five days.

Everything you saw at his place made you fear the worst. First, his door wasn't closed; his snowshoes and rifle were there; his jacket, lined with sheepskin, hung on its nail. Sadder yet: his plate, with its congealed remnants of rabbit stew (you could see traces left by a piece of bread he'd used to sop up the gravy), was on the table next to half a glass of wine. He must have been in the middle of eating; something, someone must have called him outside; he went out right away, perhaps without even swallowing his mouthful of stew. His hat was on the bed.

This time, the villagers were terrified like a flock of sheep. In broad daylight (overcast, dark, blue, snow, cloud cutting the arrow of the steeple), you heard the women crying, the children shouting, doors slamming, and it was an uphill battle to try to decide anything. Everyone talked about the gendarmes; no one wanted to go fetch them. One had to travel three leagues in solitude beneath the black sky and, because it was a question of Bergues—a mature man, sturdy, brave, the cleverest of all—no one felt sturdy enough, brave enough, or clever enough. Finally, four of them agreed to go together.

People even avoided Bergues's house as if it belonged to a victim of the plague. It stood gaping right onto the snow in the street; its door, which no one had the courage to close, was wide open and the sky overhead seemed even darker than the inside of his house.

Before the four emissaries to the royal gendarmerie in Clelles departed, the entire village came out and stood quietly around them; those emissaries looked very serious and quite pale behind their beards as they placed their weapons in their braces and secured belts filled with boar cartridges, an entire arsenal of sharp knives, naked blades, and even a small ax on their padded jackets. At last they put on their snowshoes; then, climbing very slowly up the hillside behind which the main road passes, they disappeared. All that was left to do now was to barricade yourself inside.

You can easily imagine the stories these four men told at the gendarmerie in Clelles after walking several leagues in sheer solitude in the dying light. Despite the overcast sky and the state of the roads that prevented quick journeys, there must have been a lively and immediate exchange of dispatch riders between the police quarters in Mens and Monétier because, at eleven that night, along with the four emissaries who were guiding it, a small company of six gendarmes on horseback arrived in the village with weapons and bags and a captain named Langlois.

They were all old soldiers and immediately they began to growl and grumble with such familiarity that everyone felt completely reassured. They requisitioned the stables for their horses and set up a bivouac to keep watch right in the town square, with a sentry box made from boards, and sentinels, patrols, passwords, the whole thing. Langlois took a very long clay pipe from his haversack and, seated behind the windows of the Café de la Route, he directed the operations.

Despite this long clay pipe, the fur-lined slippers, and a deerskin cap under which he sheltered his ears, Langlois was a right rascal. He shed some light on things; it was a sinister light, but light nonetheless.

The table on which Bergues had eaten his last meal faced a window. This window did not look out onto the street but onto the meadows. Langlois sat where Bergues had sat to eat his stew. Langlois mimicked Bergues eating his stew and soaking up the gravy with the piece of bread that had left its traces in the congealed fat. As he did so, Langlois was led to look through the window and he asked,

“What’s over that way?” (and it was a good question because, *over that way*, like over every way that season, was snow, and gray, bluish, and black cotton); over that way was the Avers road. Langlois sent for his boots. While waiting for them to be brought to him, he explained that in his opinion Bergues had been in the middle of eating when he must have seen something extraordinary that immediately drew him outside.

Once his boots were on, Langlois and one of his men left in the direction in which Bergues must have gone. They didn’t get far. They went just up to the spot where the mist and the cloud began to erase them. There, they motioned for the others to join them. And while the others set out toward them, they advanced another twenty steps, that is, as far as the village was concerned, they walked straight into the cloud; from the village, they surely could no longer be seen. Those who were on their way to join them could still see because they were getting closer. Langlois and his man were leaning over something. It was not Bergues. It was a large trampling of crows’ feet. In digging down some twenty centimeters through the snow (which was about the depth of the snow that had fallen over the past six days—taking into account the settling produced by the night freeze and the wind), they found a large patch of blood-bound snow.

So this was where Bergues had ended up. Behind the curtain of clouds. And from there? Nothing. Only the snow, untouched all around except for the tracks left by Langlois and the gendarme, and those who had joined them.

Patrols were sent out to look for the body. Not unsystematically, as in the case of Marie Chazottes, but methodically, in squads of four, each squad led by a gendarme to a precise sector that Langlois had marked in pencil on a map of the canton. Nothing was found. Obviously there was a 99 percent chance that the snow—or the thaw—would give up the body. But the thaw had not given up Marie Chazottes’s body. After two weeks, Langlois went back to the Café de la Route, took up his long clay pipe again, and once again put on his slippers and his deerskin cap.

“What I need to know,” he said, “is why they are being killed and carried off. It’s not to steal. It’s not women killers because of Bergues and, also, Ravanel Georges . . . If we were in Zululand, I would say it was to eat them . . . Other than that, I just can’t see what it could be.”

New, very precise passwords were given to everyone. The school was closed. People were advised not to leave the village for any reason, even in broad daylight (still overcast, dark, blue, snow and cloud, by the way); if there was no avoiding it, then it should be in a group under the guard of two gendarmes. And in the village itself, people were told not to go out alone; there should be at least two men and at least three women. Two gendarmes were on duty in the town square; four others, two by two, did rounds of the town. Twice a day Langlois put his boots back on and made a careful inspection, nosing about in all the courtyards, barnyards, nooks, crannies, and cul-de-sacs. At three in the afternoon, final chores: wood, fodder for the barns that were separate from their houses, and at four o’clock, curfew. The outside patrols came in. The entire company made the rounds of all the houses, one after the other, and a sentinel remained stationed at the sentry box in the town square. Twice a night, patrols went through the village. Langlois made everyone hang an old basin and a cudgel on their front door. At the slightest thing, the order was to bang on the basin with the cudgel with all one’s might.

“I prefer,” Langlois had said, “to be disturbed twenty times for nothing than to miss the one time that matters. So don’t hesitate; if something scares you, bang.” (Langlois was a fine man: delicate mustache, a nice shirtfront, a certain elegance; he knew how to speak and wasn’t lazy.)

After what I’ve told you, do you perhaps get the impression that the people were a bit cowardly? Naturally: we aren’t there; they are. And yet, they didn’t bang on their basins every second; they only banged once—the afternoon when Callas Delphin-Jules disappeared from the face of the earth.

“I can’t do anything about it,” Langlois said after a week of cursing and racing through the woods that were lost in the clouds. “I can’t do anything about it. I am not God and you are a bunch of imbeciles. If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a hundred times: ‘Don’t go out alone, even in broad daylight.’ Your Delphin’s wife claims that he wanted to go out alone ‘to sit on the dunghill.’ I can understand that. But how hard is it to keep on your toes: one, two, and it’s over in a flash, do you understand? Do I need to draw you a picture? When she finally decided to bang on her pot, more than an hour had gone by since your Delphin had left. I told her, ‘Birdbrain, you should have banged after five minutes.’ She said to me, ‘My Delphin took longer than five minutes. He smoked his pipe out there!’ Stupid biddy! Well, there goes another. And this one right out from under our noses. Don’t I look clever now!”

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Callas Delphin-Jules! We know what that one looked like. Barely two years earlier, he’d had his portrait painted with his wife, Anselmie, their pinkies linked. The portrait is here, at the Honoriuses’; I’ve seen it.

Go over there, you'll see it. The Honoriuses are from Corps but Honorius's sister-in-law, well, I don't know, some first-cousin thing that I confess I don't know very much about. Normally we should know those things, but in this case, it's not clear; I don't really know. What's certain is that the sister-in-law, the cousin, inherited from a Callas from here. No. I know, wait, I'm on the right track now. It isn't the sister-in-law or the cousin, it's Honorius's aunt, his mother's sister who inherited from a Callas, who was her brother-in-law, her husband's brother and the grandson of the brother of Callas Delphin-Jules. There, that's it. I knew I would remember. I've followed the family lines of everyone who participated in the thing. To see how they now figure in the present (but we'll get to that later). When the aunt died, there was a settlement and the Honoriuses from Corps got the use of the house here with all its furnishings. The house is where they opened their grocery and notions shop, and it was among these furnishings that I found the photograph of Callas Delphin-Jules and Anselmie.

Anselmie! You can understand Langlois. She must have stood before him (no doubt in her Sunday best on that occasion, because she was now a widow) just as she is in the portrait: her body incomprehensible under all those petticoats, bodices, bustles, and belts binding and trussing and encircling her from all sides and back to front; the head of a goat, the eyes of an antediluvian mammal, a mouth like it's been slit by a saw, and two nostrils turned up toward the rain. More stubborn than a mule! Stubborn as the statue of a mule! Next to her was Delphin-Jules, whose last joy since he'd had the imprudence to latch on to Anselmie's pinkie, the last joy and the one for which he risked his life, was to go smoke his pipe *sitting on the dunghill*.

But as far as can still be made out on that old, pale yellow daguerreotype, Delphin-Jules's features yield a tiny clue that is not to be overlooked. His face is round and babyish, with a thick handlebar mustache that emphasizes the girth of his cheeks, the heaviness of his chin, and the size of his jowls resting in three folds on his Souvaroff collar. If at the time there had been color photographs, there is no question that we would now see that Delphin was built from red flesh—good, bloody meat.

Ravanel Georges, if we are to judge from today's Ravanel, the truck driver, also had this appeal. Marie Chazottes, obviously, was not fat and red, but that's the point. She had dark brown hair that made her look very pale, but what's the expression that immediately comes to mind (I used it a while ago) when you want to suggest all the sparkling spiciness of those little brunettes? "Two pinches of pepper"—that's it. In Marie Chazottes, we don't find the *quantity* of blood we find in Ravanel (who was spied on) or Delphin (murdered) but we find a *quality* of blood, liveliness, and fire; I'm not talking about taste. I've never, as you can imagine, tasted anyone's blood; and I also have to say that this story isn't the story of a man who drank, sucked, or consumed blood (in our times, I wouldn't have bothered to mention such a common act); I'm not talking about the taste (salty no doubt). I mean that, with her very dark hair and her very white skin, it's easy to imagine the *pepper* of Marie Chazottes, to imagine that her blood was very beautiful. I said beautiful. Let's speak like a painter.

I'm not forgetting Bergues. Not that he's all that important, poor fellow, but he was courageous, generous, impulsive—not a victim but a vanquished adversary. It's as if Langlois himself had disappeared.

Obviously there's a way of looking at the world, not unlike in economics, where Langlois's blood and Bergues's blood are equal in value to the blood of Marie Chazottes, Ravanel, and Delphin-Jules. But then there is another way of looking that includes the first, according to which Abraham and Isaac proceed logically, one following the other, toward Mount Moriah; in which the obsidian knives of the priests of Quetzalcoatl logically drive deep into selected hearts. And it is through beauty that we come to know this. Impossible to live in a world believing that the sublime splendor of the guinea fowl's plumage is meaningless. Just an aside. I wanted to say it. I have.

Langlois decamped in early May. Even though the gargoyles and gutters groaned beneath enormous rivers of rain, people were more reassured by the arrival of spring than by the presence of the company of gendarmes. Many who hadn't slept for three months found deep slumber again at the sound of the great torrents hurtling through the combes.

As soon as the lovely light at the end of the rains appeared, when Le Jocond emerges from shreds of fog like a pure emerald, the distant Veymont shimmers, and the sliding away of carmine clouds reveals the high country of shadow and ice that sleeps on top of the mountains of L'Obiou, Le Ferrand, and Le Taillefer, people had the sense they were living again; a sense precisely of living a second time, along with the desire to take advantage of everything they hadn't the first time. The Workers' Circle dates from this period, and it's still going on. Burlet's father, Cather's father, Sazerat's mother, Pierrisnard's father, Julie's mother, Raffin's father, Antoinette Save's mother, Lambert's mother, Horatius's mother, Clément's father, Cléristin's cousin (the one who bequeathed the barn to the Protestant cemetery), Fernand Pierre, who was the oldest man in the canton and who died three years ago, were all born in March or April of

’45. One learns, for example, that René Martin’s beautiful house, which he got from his father, had been bequeathed to his father by a man named Coursier who as a bachelor had no family to leave it to. That inheritance dates from July ’44. Sazerat: his father was a schoolteacher because a childless man named Richaud Marie paid for his studies in Grenoble. Sazerat can tell you: his father had left school in ’39. He was five years old. He was tending to the cows. In June of ’44, Richaud swore before a notary that he’d support him until he got his teaching certificate. This is how, in the public records office of the commune and in the notarial archives in Prébois, there remain traces of the efforts the people from here made in order to live outside the normal system during the spring and summer of ’44.

As soon as winter arrived again, Langlois returned. He was alone. He put his horse up at the mayor’s but carried his haversack to the Café de la Route.

“I’m an old bachelor,” he said, “and up there I would annoy the mayor’s wife. Here, I can smoke my pipe and wear my slippers. And I like company. I’m not here to work. I have a three-month leave.”

Well, he’d said all that needed to be said in order for people to get used to seeing him behind the café windows, sitting astride his chair watching the snow fall.

He had very fine weapons. He took excellent care of them. The tradition has remained: we still call a shotgun that is in perfect shape a “Langlois.” He lined up his pistols on a marble table next to him. He greased them, wiped them down, tested the springs of the unloaded pistols, and carefully adjusted the triggers. “They fire at the slightest pressure,” he said. He aimed at snowflakes, keeping them at the tip of the barrels the whole time they were falling, without losing sight of them for a second. He loaded his weapons and placed them within reach. “And now,” he said, “I’m going to play the bourgeois.” And he positioned his police cap like a tough guy’s. He was a bourgeois from a bourgeoisie that had a strong scent of Abd-el-Kader.

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At that time, the Café de la Route was owned by a woman nicknamed Sausage: a former courtesan from Grenoble who had decided to spend her sixties in the countryside (no doubt to fulfill a dream she’d had the whole time she was working); a mighty woman, immovable as a rock, with a big mouth that she used enthusiastically to sound the charge in the ears of anyone who tried to tread on her toes. It was only in subprefectures and barracks towns that she’d plied her trade, which obviously requires knowledge of the flesh, but even more than that, a good business sense and a solid imagination, including an understanding of the two overlapping worlds. One mustn’t forget that those women, especially at the end of their glory, consoled the entire contingent of former junior officers coming back from Algeria and Allah’s paradise. Naturally, and with the most honorable of intentions, she and Langlois became as thick as thieves.

In winter, there wasn’t much happening at the Café de la Route. Around noon, four or five old men would come to drink a sou’s worth of laced coffee. They would stay there until three, sleeping around the stove. Sausage would sit near Langlois and they would discuss the ways of the world.

“What would *you* do with a dead man?” Langlois would say.

“Nothing,” she’d respond.

“Obviously,” said Langlois.

It was, like the previous years, a heavy, overcast winter, black with snow.

“What a hole-in-the-wall,” said Langlois.

“No different from Grenoble,” she’d say.

“I disagree,” Langlois would say.

Around the stove, the old men reeked of warm corduroy and quid.

“What do you mean ‘no different’?” said Langlois.

“What’s so great about Grenoble?” she’d say.

“Nothing,” Langlois would say. “There’s a village around Mer-el-Oued,” said Langlois. “It’s just like this one.”

“There’s no snow there?” she’d say.

“No, but there’s sun,” said Langlois.

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People lived through that November and December with hunched shoulders, waiting for who knows what. Around Christmas, the weather improved; there were even four or five days of real sun, freezing but very bright. Holiday bells rang out.

Langlois put on his boots and went to find the priest.

“It’s your midnight mass that worries me,” he said.

“It was getting off to a good start, in any event,” said the priest, and he led Langlois through the church that he’d been decorating for a week with holly, boxwood, and paper garlands.

Later, Langlois admitted to having been very impressed by the golden candelabras, the altar candles wrapped in tinfoil, and the beautiful chasubles that were displayed in the sacristy. “All that pageantry!” he’d said afterwards . . . (“We all understood part of the mystery,” he said, “but no one understood it in its entirety.”)

“Forgive my asking, Father,” said Langlois, “but in the neighboring villages here in the canton, are there also such fine things in the churches?”

“Of course,” said the priest. “In fact, we are the poorest. We’re the only parish that doesn’t have ornaments of real gold on its altars. All this is copper that I’ve polished with great care, but in Saint-Maurice, and in Clelles, and in Prébois, and even farther away, they have real gold. In Clelles, for example, they have a monstrance worth a fortune.”

Right then Langlois was so close to learning the whole truth that he asked if what one called a monstrance wasn’t (he was looking for the right word) that round thing?

“Exactly,” said the priest, “with its rays like the sun’s.”

“Good, good,” said Langlois. “So you say there are monstrances and candelabras, and clothing, I mean uniforms similar to those here, in all the canton’s churches?”

“More beautiful ones, much more beautiful,” said the priest, who was an athletic man, timid and inspired.

“Well then,” said Langlois, “let’s say this mass, Father. I have the feeling that perhaps there won’t be too much of a risk.”

Still, Langlois took his precautions. He decided that as long as he was there, he might as well serve some purpose, right? Besides, he let it be known that disobeying him had not been good for Delphin-Jules. And here’s what he said: “I’ll take you to midnight mass. Then I’ll gather up the men and women who want to come; I’ll need a few men in any case, I’m not up to leading everyone. How many are you: Thirty? Forty? Fifty women? I’ll need four men: one near the back, two more bringing up the rear, and me in the lead.”

He found more than four men. He found more than thirty who came with lanterns all the way to the Café de la Route to fetch him. While he was putting on his boots, they waited outside. The light from the lanterns flickered through the falling snow. There were also two or three torchbearers, their torches throwing off naked flames and pitch smoke among the white drifts. Once his boots were on, before he went out, Langlois said to Sausage, “There are at least thirty of them; every time I think I know what it’s all about, something eludes me. There are thirty of them; look at them. They’re having a great time with their lanterns. That reminds me of something . . .”

The women, too, were having a great time. They remained very dignified but were rejoicing. Even Marie Chazottes’s mother, who was being led by the arm by a sister-in-law—Anselmie no doubt, carrying a missal big enough to take down an ox.

The priest had prepared a chair for Langlois in the front row, but the captain stayed by the door.

“My place is here, Father. We are both on duty this evening.”

“You don’t think that the monster—”

“Perhaps it’s not a monster,” said Langlois.

The mass took place without incident. It was magnificent. The altar candles sparkled in clusters and even the priest indulged himself by putting a little pinch of real incense in the thuribles. As soon as the balsam smoke rings spread throughout the tiny church vessel, Langlois (who was thinking about all the churches in the canton) felt certain that the night would pass without an abduction. “I understand everything,” he thought, “and can explain nothing. I’m like a dog who can pick up the scent of a leg of lamb through a cupboard door.”

When mass ended, the priest himself took part in guarding his flock. He felt, he said, personally responsible. It was no longer snowing. The night was clad in an iron calm. The flames of the candles and torches in procession rose up as straight as spearheads.

“I’m very pleased that everyone got home without difficulty,” the priest said to Langlois, who was walking him back to the rectory.

“Nothing could happen tonight,” said Langlois.

“For a soldier who was a hero on the battlefield,” said the priest, “you have a very thorough knowledge of the powers of the mass; I congratulate you. Admit that the monster cannot come near the divine sacrifice.”

Langlois and the priest, each carrying an altar candle, found themselves alone just then at the entrance

to the rectory; that is, at the edge of the village; and, some hundred meters off, beyond a small meadow, you could see the very black wall of the forest in the very black night.

"Truth be told," said Langlois, "and I wouldn't want to upset you, Father, but I believe he is indeed nearby and I believe, on the contrary, that it's because he's nearby that we were not in danger."

"Divine grace?" asked the priest.

"I have no idea what it might be called," said Langlois. "We are men, you and I," he continued, "we have no need to be frightened of words; well, let's just say that tonight he found sufficient *diversion*."

"*You* frighten me," said the priest.

"I don't yet know exactly what I mean," said Langlois. "Perhaps I'll never know, though I'd like to. It's still too early for him to be over there," he continued, pointing toward the shadowy edge of the woods. "Maybe he won't come tonight, but he may well be in there already, watching you and me without our being in danger. Here with our candles, we are already giving him everything he needs. It's odd, isn't it, Father! What a thread our lives hang by!"

Langlois immediately sensed he had said something out of place. The priest let him know it, barely wishing him a good evening.

When the door of the rectory had closed and he heard the two locks click into place, Langlois blew out his candle and went back to the Café de la Route, whistling a little tune.

"So," Sausage said to him, "did you bring in your silly geese?"

"Geese, turtledoves, and partridges, I brought them all in," said Langlois. "Give me a drop of brandy, will you? My insides need warming. He's not a monster. He's a man like all the others. You want me to tell you what we need: midnight mass on New Year's Eve, and a long one without interruptions."

"You said it, mister," she responded as she handed him his candle.

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November and December went by without incident. The January days lined up, one after the other, peacefully and slowly. No one dared to breathe during the dark stormy days that stretched out in absolute silence. February began. It wasn't over yet, but you could trust that by March . . .

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One morning, Frédéric II was making his coffee. It was seven o'clock; black as night, but the snow was beginning to take on that green break-of-day color. While the coffee was brewing, Frédéric II allowed his mind to wander; he looked all around him. He looked at those dresser drawers that one rarely opens, and above the wardrobes where one rarely goes to see what's there. Not for all the gold in the world would Frédéric II have given up those two hours of freedom every morning. He would think about his youth. He would think of everything he'd do if he didn't have a wife and child, of everything he'd do if it were to be done over, of everything he should do. He'd pause in his thinking to take a box down from the mantel and rifle through its contents. Thrilled to find a peg or a nail to slip in his pocket, or a little piece of pitch to move to another box, or an old amber bit from the pipe that belonged to Frédéric I, or even Frédéric zero from the mists of time; odds and ends that lips had sucked on under Louis XIV and that he lingered over for ages, wondering what he could ever do with such amazing things.

That morning, he was into the dresser drawers and in one of them he found a lovely little colorful clockface. Everything was there: the mechanism, the hands, and even two keys, one to wind it and one for the chime. The chime was perfect. Oh, that! Never had Frédéric II heard such a bell! It sounded like a darning needle striking a little glass lamp chimney. You wound the bell by sticking the key in a small round hole, which was, precisely, the eye of the shepherd with his golden hair, golden jacket, and red scarf, who was handing that very blue cornflower to the shepherdess, so pale with a touch of pink. You stuck the key in the shepherdess's eye to wind the clock itself. An extraordinary movement! My goodness! The chime was beautiful, but you had to wait an hour to hear it again, whereas the movement, well: tick tock tick tock all the time. What a sound! Ah, never had Frédéric II had such sweet sounds in his ears. There was no question of moving on to something else that morning. He closed the drawer and began to plot his delightful day. He wouldn't be content until this clock was hanging on the wall. No point in trying to do without it. Just imagining that he wouldn't hear that tick tock made him find that time was passing very slowly. The wife could say what she wanted. His mind was made up.

His coffee was delicious. The clock was in his lap and he was thinking about what he would do. It was simple: he'd make a little wooden case, cutting out a round hole with a saw in which he would set the clockface, and a good hook behind to hang it with. Out of what wood? Walnut, of course. He even remembered a bit of new wax that was probably in the box marked "Spices" over there on the mantel—

just what he needed to give the case a shine and mask the joints.

He didn't have any walnut here. There were two nice pieces of it at the sawmill. He pictured himself sawing, sanding, adjusting, and varnishing during what looked like it was going to be an overcast day. He carefully put the little clock back in the drawer after looking once again with immense pleasure at the golden shepherd and the pale shepherdess.

Before his wife got up (she'd want too many explanations), he would go down to the sawmill. It would just take twenty minutes.

Sordid day of fog; you could only see five or six meters in front of you. The frozen snow was easy to walk on. Bone cold: he had on his sheepskin jacket. The village was asleep. There was light in the windows of the Café de la Route, at the mayor's, at Dorothée's. That girl was an early riser!

The road to Avers, from which you can see Bergues's windows and—no more village. One hundred meters: here at least you can see a little better, that is, the fog glows a bit more and you can make out a few hints of trees that are willows. One hundred meters farther and it's the sawmill.

It took Frédéric II about ten minutes to find his walnut. He was at his door; he was about to close it; he heard a noise coming from the beech tree. Naturally, the beech was entirely erased by the mist. All you could see was its enormous trunk; the rest was completely lost. Frédéric II listened; it didn't seem like anything; it was noise. You couldn't possibly guess what was making that noise. Birds? Well, they had to be big ones then, moving cautiously. In this season there are no birds' nests. Rats? It seemed that at one moment something had squealed; it wasn't a rat sound. You could see absolutely nothing. Where the noise was coming from, there was nothing but white. Frédéric stood there with his hand on the latch.

He wasn't wearing clogs; that morning he had on his boots. He could walk without making a sound. Slowly he let go of the latch and approached the tree. About three or four meters from the beech trunk there was a bramble bush (it's still there). Frédéric II had been behind the bush for perhaps half a minute, wide-eyed and openmouthed, when there was a noise that resembled one that something, or someone, or an animal, a snake sliding along the branches or the bark would make; and, out of the mist as if down a trapdoor, there slowly appeared a booted foot, a pair of trousers, a jacket, a fur hat, a man! He descended the two and a half meters of the trunk that were visible and placed his feet on the ground.

Who was that fellow?

Naturally he was facing the tree trunk, with his back to Frédéric II. He didn't look familiar. He slipped into a copse, took four or five steps, and disappeared into the mist.

"What the hell was he doing way up inside there?" thought Frédéric II. He went over to the beech and noticed fat carpenter nails hammered in the trunk spaced so that they created steps of a sort.

"Shit, strange fellow, what the hell is this?" Frédéric II said to himself. "Let's see," and he began to climb. It was easy: the nails were placed so that feet and hands had no trouble.

So there's my Frédéric II on the crotch of the trunk, at the spot where the main limbs begin. And shrouded in fog. He could no longer see the ground. Everything happened very quickly. It was like something was burning below him.

Of the four main limbs that branched away from one another there, the biggest (as wide as three men together) had been swept clear of snow. You could see that the man had come down from there. In fact, there were still carpenter nails here and there to help.

"Darn rascal!" Frédéric II grabs hold of the nails and climbs. He climbs. Beneath him and around him, the mist closes in, ever denser. And he feels that the branch, instead of growing thinner as you'd expect, is, on the contrary, becoming thicker. It can happen: some kind of canker will cause the wood to expand. This branch had expanded to the point of now being as thick as five men; at the same time, it was becoming more horizontal.

Luckily right then Frédéric II stopped for a few seconds to catch his breath. A few seconds during which, without his realizing it, his body and mind were preparing for the horror.

He drew closer (he did not climb any more, he stretched toward the edge of a sort of enormous nest, wide as a vat, that the canker had hollowed out in the enormous branch). Without knowing it, he was at that moment so forewarned, so divided, so split in two by trepidation as if by an ax that his hands were bolted to the nails and his arms were as stiff as wrenches. Only gruesome curiosity made him crane his neck: he was all eyes. Which is why he remained solidly fastened when his face arrived, through the fog, three finger widths away from another face that was very white, very cold, very peaceful, with closed eyes.

Everything I've been recounting from the moment Frédéric II grabbed the first nail and left the ground until now lasted no more than a minute. He remained face-to-face with that other, very white face for barely a few seconds. The span of one hundred thousand years. He thought he was dreaming, seeing the enameled face of the shepherdess on the clock. And yet he said, "Dorothée, Dorothée dead!"

For it was the well-known face of Dorothée, Dorothée whom he'd seen twenty minutes earlier in the lit window. When those few seconds jumbled up his dream and the enameled face of the shepherdess, he realized that the monstrous thing had just taken place; that Dorothée had woken up first to make the coffee, must have gone out to collect wood, and . . . disappeared! No, this time she had not disappeared; she was there, he saw her. He even ventured to touch her. She was so familiar. Dorothée! So, the man? It was the man!

Frédéric II found himself at the foot of the beech tree without realizing it, following the man's tracks behind the bushes, then in the meadow that went up the hill; through the fog, his tracks were clear, isolated, fresh, and Frédéric was not hoping to catch up to him, oh no, no! But he followed him.

He passed the Carles meadow. The tracks were still so fresh that in some of them the frozen snow, dislodged by the shoe tip, was still crumbling into the footprint. He passed the Bernard meadow. It must have been about eight in the morning then and the fog had slowly begun to recede. In spots, it thinned out enough to allow the trees by the road to be seen. In these gaps in the fog, Frédéric II could make out the man climbing unhurriedly in front of him. It was indeed that unfamiliar appearance of his: that jacket, that fur hat, that steadfast gait; Frédéric was directly in the line of his tracks.

Frédéric II crouched behind a hedge and let the man get a bit of a lead. When the man started melting bit by bit into the swathes of fog, Frédéric II began walking again. He headed straight for Le Jocond, like the time of Ravanel, when Bergues had followed and then given up in the cloud. Frédéric II knew that *he* would not give up. It was not a question of courage: it was about curiosity (if there's curiosity when you're entranced).

The snow was completely virgin, except for those very fresh footprints.

The man headed very intelligently toward the Burle woods. After a moment, the forest edge began to darken the fog. The man entered the forest.

Right then Frédéric II should have called it quits and headed diagonally toward the woods. It was the prudent thing to do, in case the other man was lying in ambush, but Frédéric II thought only of placing his footprints in the footprints before him. Besides, when he reached the forest edge, the fog, sifted by the thick needles of the fir trees laden with snow, allowed him to catch a glimpse, through gray half-light, of the back and the hat and the leisurely gait of the man.

Leisurely but firm; that is, steady. A man accustomed to walking across vast spaces.

The man continued climbing; came out of the woods; approached the pastures of L'Archat. With a great deal of assurance, he climbed right where the path lay buried, even though the great masses of snow made everything look the same.

At those heights, there was a lot of light. As they were nearing the summit of L'Archat, Frédéric II had the good sense to stop and let the man gain a little ground. Someone with all his wits about him would have let him get a good hour ahead. In that region, in that season, that man was surely the only person out and about. His tracks were clear, as if carved with a knife; there would be no losing him. But Frédéric II will say, "I had to lay eyes on him." He stopped two hundred meters below the man and the man, having reached the summit of L'Archat, also stopped.

He was like a silhouette up there. ("Like a target," Frédéric II will say.) There was no longer a thick layer of fog above them and, above the fog, clouds must have been passing because, from time to time after their big shadows went by, long shafts of white powder whirled in the mist. On the other side of L'Archat, those long arrows of light must have pierced the vast stretches below that go all the way to the Negron pass, to Rousset, to unimaginable, far-off places: the wide world! Entirely covered in fog: an ocean of barley syrup with slumbering waves, in which those bursts of white light must have made the archipelago of the mountain peaks suddenly appear, like pale islands studded with black. The geography of a new world.

The man was up there, calmly regarding this creation, when Frédéric II, on his slope, noticed he was still carrying the two little sheets of walnut under his arm.

That's when he became conscious of things. Surely, if the village had been a few steps away, he would have gone running back there to raise a hue and cry. But, on discovering himself standing on the summit of L'Archat with his wood under his arm, he said to himself, "Shit! What the hell am I supposed to do with this wood?" And he stuck it in the snow to free his hands, all the while watching the silhouette, the target up there, and as a frozen rod spread through his spine and stiffened his hair, he saw at one and the same time, growing larger, exploding outward like a wheel of white fireworks, the superimposed faces of the enamel shepherdess and Dorothée. In the stomach-turning haziness of a split-second thought, he wondered if the hole for the key to wind the mechanism was in the shepherdess's eye or in Dorothée's. (He'll say, "Anger had me by the throat . . .")

The man began to climb down on the other side of L'Archat. Frédéric II followed his tracks on all fours.

The summit of L'Archat is not wide: about fifteen meters. Frédéric II inched over to the edge.

Down below, the man was walking along the invisible path as precisely as before; that is, descending in zigzags as he ambled ahead. There was no question of Frédéric following him out into the open like that: there wasn't fog enough to hide him now. He would have to wait until the man entered the woods. Frédéric II was clever enough to stay a meter or two below the summit on his side of the mountain, dodging and weaving to reach a corner of a fir forest that he could vaguely make out below, the name of which he didn't know because here he must have been within the bounds of I don't know what commune; maybe Lucettes. From time to time, so as not to take any chances, Frédéric II looked over the top of the other slope. There was nothing to fear: the man was walking down calmly, like someone out for a stroll (which makes a real impression on people from here, because to them that's a sign of contentment, wealth, prefect, boss, millionaire), so that Frédéric II had to go over in his mind the whole long path from the beech tree to here, where there had been but a single track in the snow, just that one, sole and unique: the track of this man strolling along.

Who now entered the woods. Frédéric II gave him time to enter rather deeply; then, going around the edge of the woods, he met up with the man's tracks. (Later he will say, "I was afraid to lose him.") Now, in fact, he stuck to the trail for reasons different from those that had brought him there. Perhaps even a bit ashamed to have come this far for reasons he didn't understand; he had become a fox. He was using all his cunning. Not a hair on his head was thinking of anything but cunning. As fat as he was, he had become silent and airborne; he moved like a bird or a spirit. He went from copse to copse without leaving a trace. (With his primitive sense of the world, he will say, "Without touching the ground.") Completely different from the Frédéric II of the sawmill dynasty; no longer on land, where he needed to saw wood to earn enough to feed Frédéric III; Frédéric II was also in a new world where you needed an adventurer's abilities. Happy in an extraordinary new way! (That, he won't say. At first he only understood it confusedly; but, even if he had understood it quite clearly, he wouldn't have said it, he would have hidden it forever, even at the final moment when he in turn would become a hunted man on the move.) Happy in an extraordinary way, just to imagine (no, that's too strong a word: to know instinctively) that this new world was vast and limitless, similar to that archipelago of pale islands dotted with black that suddenly appeared through the shafts of luminous white powder on the far side of L'Archat.

The man, however, all the while maintaining his steady pace, obdurately heading toward a precise goal, went on his way, unhurried and unfaltering. He knew exactly what he was doing. He went as far as the valley, followed the stream on the left of the mountainside back up, crossed at the exact spot where one had to cross to find oneself at the exact spot where the path continued along the right side of the mountain. Not making a sound, Frédéric II moved like a shadow but, even if he sometimes got down on all fours, he couldn't prevent the lower branches of the pines from brushing against his jacket and making a terrifying noise in a silence so charged that, far in the distance, you could hear the snow crackle on the trees as they stretched their branches. But the man never looked back. Once, just after fording the stream, he continued precisely along the path buried beneath more than two meters of snow —and made an abrupt turn. Frédéric II, out of the woods in the open, saw a white splash flash out from under the fur hat: the man's face. Frédéric II stood still. (He'll say, "Just then, I said: I'm a goner!") But, while the motionless Frédéric II was trying to look like a tree trunk, the man went on walking with his steady, calm gait, as if he had long and often been in places where he knew that no one would ever catch up to him.

It is a *fox* memory that Frédéric II will retain from this pursuit. When he'll speak of the countryside behind L'Archat, he'll speak about it in the same way Columbus must have spoken about the East Indies. His view of things was structured around new necessities. He saw the trees in relation to the trunks that could hide him; noticed whether they were positioned more or less judiciously behind the man; if they would allow his pursuit to proceed with more or less difficulty. (He will say how in many places he was either concealed or exposed in the valleys and combes, on the slopes, and how these concealments or exposures fit together: the spots in the woods where he could advance more quickly; the clearings where he could slip round the edges hidden behind the fir trunks; the open spaces where he had to wait a good long time before entering; and all the while strange information that he was obliged to interpret instantly and put to use immediately—which to his total astonishment he understood—reached him from the snow, the silence, the blackness of the branches, and even the distant anise scent of damp tree bark.)

He will not say that, by the time he was quite certain the man would never look back, he had stopped thinking about Dorothée's frozen face. It was as ancient as the deaths of Joan of Arc or of Louis XVI, from which so many thousands of people have since quietly benefited.

The man passed through a woods, went down into a valley, climbed back up the other slope, walked

along a ridge, passed through another woods even vaster than the first—a full two valleys of copses through which, unfazed, the man calmly teased out his path. He continued up a long hillside and arrived at a forest trail. He began to go down it. Little by little, he left behind the larch woods, the fir woods, the beech woods, the oak woods, and came upon willows, poplars, then hedges that barely emerged from the snow, then undulating fields. Two hundred meters behind the man, Frédéric II stopped short: A quarter of a league in front of the man, over there, lay a farm with a single window winking beneath a heavy white beret. A frail feather of blue smoke rose from its thick roofs.

(Frédéric II will say, "Right away I thought . . ." He won't say what he was really thinking about because it was at this point that he had to strip off a fox skin—almost a wolf skin.) Out of breath, he waited a long moment for the roof and the smoke to reconnect to each other, while the man, who doesn't make such a big deal about things, goes down, passes the farm, and continues to head downward.

Now the footpath has become a small road streaked with sleigh tracks. The road winds across snowy fields squared off by kitchen-garden fences. The moist tips of two or three rows of cornstalks stick out like the hairs of a beard. A scent of soup, soot, and horse manure. The man disappears behind a ridge that must be at the top of a sloping meadow. Now Frédéric II begins to run. This is how he suddenly comes upon a village, one that the man is about to enter.

Frédéric II will say exactly what he thought and what he did. Calmly, one behind the other, they follow the street; it has to be called Main Street because this village is more substantial than ours. There are three grocery stores, a tobacco shop, a hardware store, and these shops have windows through which you can see people under lamps in aisles filled with watering cans, padlocks, twists of tobacco, and jars of mustard. If the man were to attack someone, a single cry (Frédéric's) would bring twenty people outside. But the man, after Main Street, crosses the church square. He goes down another street, very lovely, clean and wide; the houses are grand. He simply heads toward one of these houses, ambling along, as if he'd just gone out for a breath of fresh air; the same gait he had this morning when he left the beech tree, the one he's maintained the whole way. He knocks on the door to one of these houses and, when someone opens it, scrapes the soles of his boots on the scraper. Then, on the threshold, unwrapping his scarf from his neck, he goes in: all very human. Noon bells were ringing.

Frédéric II goes past the house innocently enough; through the windowpane he sees a lit ceiling lamp —the day is dark. Beneath the lamp, the table must be set. He went to sit on a doorstop by a barn door. Soon the church bells chimed one o'clock. A little boy came out of the house, running toward the church square. He comes back. He's carrying a paper cone with at least four sous' worth of tobacco in it.

Frédéric II remembers the five-sou piece he always keeps in his fob pocket. If it's there, that'll be good. He pats and it's there. From the beginning of this wide street with its grand houses, he counts: One, two, three, four houses; the man's is the fifth. He counts again, carefully: Yes, it's the fifth; besides, it's the only house with two windows on the ground floor on either side of the door. After that, Frédéric II leaves. He has two more things to do: Find out the name of the village; what is this place? And eat a piece of bread. Since morning, he's had nothing in his stomach but coffee. For the name, the easiest thing would be to go to the town hall because he's not going into a café to ask: What is this place here? Normally, when you go somewhere you know where you're going. In the town hall, he doesn't need to go any farther than the corridor, where there's a poster announcing an award: "Chichiliane Town Hall." And now? To the Minimes Inn? No. Minimes Inn, five sous. No: a bakery where he'll buy two sous' worth of bread, and then to the café on the square where he'll ask for two sous' worth of brandy in which to dip it.

He has to get back as quickly as possible and see Langlois. Four leagues—the weather is still dry—a good four hours. He sets off. And the weather is so dry that two or three fellows are out on the streets on their way—it has to be—to the stables, to the woodsheds. At the corner of the church square with the road to Clelles on one side and on the other, sure enough, the man's street, he comes upon one of these fellows. And he asks him, "Say, that house over there" (they move a few steps to the side so they can see it well), "the fifth one, with the two windows; do you know who lives there?"

"Yes, yes, Monsieur V."

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Frédéric II got back to the village at six o'clock. He must have struggled on the black ice and, as night fell while he carried his heavy secret, struggled even more during those final two hours. Everything was etched on his face; not to mention that two sous' worth of bread and two sous' worth of brandy don't do much to revitalize a man who's walked more than eight leagues without stopping to rest. He went straight to the Café de la Route and opened the door. Sausage was alone. She wheezed the wheeze of a cow and her eighty-eight kilos shook; she opened her mouth round and wide for at least twenty seconds

before she let out a cry that made the lamp shudder. Langlois, rushing down from his room, landed on his two feet in the kitchen, a pistol in each hand. Then, after twenty seconds of sizing up Frédéric II in silence, all he managed to say, in a small, childish voice was, “So, you’re not dead?”

It was the stupidity of the question and the small child’s voice coming from Langlois that impressed Frédéric II most of all; he entered the room without a word and dropped heavily into a chair. They had thought he’d been abducted; they told him that Dorothée had disappeared at the same time as he had. Two in one day, right under their very noses! And Langlois had been upstairs, writing his letter of resignation, when Sausage had cried out.

“I know where Dorothée is,” said Frédéric II, “and I know who put her where she is.”

Just then Frédéric II’s wife arrived, and she began literally to scream. Langlois let go of his pistols and shook her like a plum tree; finally, as gallantly as could be, he slapped her twice, hard, and turning on his boot heels, grabbed Frédéric II by the arm. “Come,” he said. And took him upstairs to his room.

When they came back downstairs, Sausage and Frédéric II’s wife were reviving themselves with two little glasses of stone-fruit brandy.

“You,” he said to Sausage, “go find me five or six men. Six would be better. I want Coquillat, the two Ravanels, Pugnères, Bertrand, and Horatius. Don’t worry. You’re not in danger anymore. It’s over. You,” he said to Frédéric’s wife, “go make something to eat and leave the man in peace. You,” he said to Frédéric II, “be ready in an hour at most.”

Coquillat, the two Ravanels, Pugnères, Bertrand, and Horatius were the strongest men around. There were three woodcutters among them. They went to fetch their ropes, some lanterns, and a small ladder (which is what they use here for a stretcher when someone is injured or dies in the fields).

They found Dorothée nicely laid out in her nest of tree and fog. She was lying on bones, next to three skulls, the smallest of which must surely have been that of Marie Chazottes; the two others belonged to Bergues and Delphin-Jules, impossible to distinguish the one from the other.

“Only Dorothée,” said Langlois. “We’ll come back for the others tomorrow. Let’s hurry. It’s urgent. Even she could stay here all night, but it’s for her mother. And tighten that knot around her stomach. I don’t want her coming loose as you bring her down.”

Aided by a span of foggy red lantern light, Coquillat slid Dorothée down like a plumb line between his huge hands. The Ravanels waited below with the ladder.

The whole thing, including the military condolences to Dorothée’s mother, who rocked back and forth wordlessly in front of her daughter’s corpse as if she meant to go on doing it for the rest of her life, took barely half an hour. Langlois was more fiercely drawn to the living than to the dead. He went to Frédéric II’s house.

Frédéric II and his wife sat face-to-face, staring at each other in silence.

“Don’t try to figure it out,” Langlois said to them. Then to Frédéric II: “Did you eat? You’re tired; try as you might, you won’t be able to sleep. You have to come. You’re the only one who can tell me who it is.”

“Oh, I’m coming, all right,” said Frédéric II.

Ravanel’s sleigh with its iron runners was hitched to two trotters in front of the Café de la Route. Langlois took Ravanel off to the side.

“I’m going alone with Frédéric, no one else. I need discipline. I’ll get two men from the Clelles barracks. Go home and sleep. This is my business.”

And giddyup!

Langlois was wearing his police cap and cavalry coat. Frédéric II was bundled up in his carter’s cloak. He hadn’t wanted to wear his fur cap. He had a beret pulled down over his ears. (He will say that he was thinking of Monsieur V., who at that moment must have been smoking his four sous’ worth of tobacco in the golden glow of the ceiling lamp.)

In Clelles, they took two gendarmes with rifles and cartridge pouches. As they were about to leave, the lieutenant came up to the sleigh.

“Captain,” he said, “don’t you have the paper?”

“What paper?” thundered Langlois. “You think I’m going to wait for the dispatch rider to come back? You think I need a paper from the royal prosecutor in order to ride through the woods with two men because I’m afraid of the dark? I’m going through the woods. Understood? And I’m afraid of the dark. Understood? Fall out!”

The lieutenant stood at attention, saluted, and did an about-face.

A quarter of a league from Chichiliane, Langlois stopped. He called to one of the gendarmes: “Farnaud, climb down and get rid of those bells for me.” (He was talking about the horses’ sleigh bells that until then had been ringing out gaily.) “And put out the lantern.”

That last quarter of a league was taken at a walk.

The glow coming from the windowpanes of the café door faintly lit the church square. Langlois knocked on a windowpane with his whip. A man came out.

"The mayor's?" said Langlois.

It was three houses away.

To the mayor, he said simply, "Give me the key to your meeting room. Your town hall is on the square, across from the road to Clelles, isn't it? Give me the key, king's orders. Are there at least armchairs in your meeting room? And two or three bits of candle? Perfect. Total secrecy. Affairs of state. Not a word or you'll go straight to Devil's Island. Take care of these horses. Put them in a good stable."

To us, he said, "Line up on the right," and there we were on that infamous street (Frédéric II will say). At the beginning of the street, he pointed out the town hall on the corner, and its windows keeping an eye on everything. It was easy to pick out the fifth house: there was a lantern directly opposite.

"Farnaud," said Langlois, "you station yourself here." (He pointed to the deep recess formed by a partly opened shed door.) "Don't let anyone leave that house there, across the street, see? And don't fall asleep or I'll break your neck; and I'll . . . well, you know me!"

He led the two of us, the other gendarme and me (Frédéric II will say), behind that notorious house where, ferreting around cautiously, we found a tiny lean-to right next to what must also have been a back door; he stationed the other gendarme there, with the same instructions. He added that there would be no relief, that he would come from time to time to get information about things but that they were stuck there for the night. He acknowledged that it wasn't warm out, but needs must when the devil drives and, anyway, he had chosen both of them because he knew they were capable of anything. And, indeed, they seemed to be.

There was still light behind the shutters. I say to him, "Why don't we go in, there are four of us!" I understand that my question annoys him, so I shut my mouth. He leads me to the town hall, and he opens it as if it were his own house. So there we are in the meeting room. He strikes his lighter and lights a candle stub to inspect the place. He drags an armchair in front of the window (through which we can see the whole length of the street under its three lanterns and, opposite the middle lantern, my fifth house). I drag over another armchair. He says to me, "Get comfortable," and blows out the candle.

"We're contraband here," he says. "And also," he says to me, "there are laws, Frédéric. I couldn't give a good goddamn about bureaucratic laws, you know, but I respect human laws. And one of those laws says: Never arrest anyone, not even the greatest of criminals, between sunset and sunrise. First. Next, I won't hide it from you, we're not in a great position here. You have no witness. He only needs to say you've made a mistake. Third, something else is my personal business. And there's no point in explaining it to you. To cut a long story short, we're going to stay the whole night. You don't need to keep watch. There are three of us for that. If you want to go to sleep, sleep."

Obviously, I don't sleep. He's up to all kinds of things the whole night. He goes out, he comes back in. I see that he goes to visit his gendarmes and he even goes to put his ear against the shutters and the door, but like a cat.

And day breaks. And we see the bust of Louis-Philippe.

"King!" says Langlois. He seems to be saying: And so what?

But the time has come. Langlois is on the lookout for something. I wonder what it is, because he seems to be looking up. What he's watching for is the chimney of the house. He's waiting for it to start smoking, and as soon as it does, he stands up and says, "Onward!"

He picks up the gendarme from the barn door. He says to us, "Pay attention, this is where I need discipline, so listen up. I'll break the neck of any one of you who doesn't do exactly as I say. Even if it seems extraordinary to you. Especially if it seems extraordinary. Because something extraordinary will no doubt happen; and we even need to hope it will happen. I'm going to go into this house; I'll stay as long as I have to; time is not an issue; wait here. Don't move. And this is what might happen." ("If I'm seeing clearly," says Langlois.) "The door will open. And that man will come out. Let him go. Don't shout. Don't move. Don't shoot. Let him go, understood?"

I found all that a bit far-fetched and I said so. So, on my honor (Frédéric II will say), he grabbed me by my tie and said, "Listen up, Frédéric, if you make a move, if you utter one word, it's you I'll shoot."

Now that was serious.

He repeated to the gendarme: "He will come out, none of you move. He will leave, none of you move. When I come out, go" (he said to the gendarme) "fetch your colleague behind the house and the three of you, follow me closely. That's all. At ease."

He adjusted his police cap and smoothed his coat collar. He crossed the street, knocked on the door. Someone came to open it (we couldn't see who) and in he went.

It didn't take them long to reach an agreement. Langlois must have carried out his business in a flash.

After, let's say, two minutes, not more, the door opened. I confess I stopped breathing. And I saw the man from the front. There was something familiar about him.

No need for Langlois to have gone on like that or to have grabbed me by the tie. I wasn't about to raise a cry or shoot (Frédéric II forgot as he said this that he hadn't been armed) or run behind him. I was waiting to see what I'd never seen. He was a man like all the others! Even though, as I said, there was something familiar about him. (And indeed, as he found out later, it was the man with whom he'd remained crouching in the gear shed during the storm.)

It was him. I recognized his gait: his manner of sauntering that, as he left the beech tree, had made me follow him through Le Jocond and L'Archat. The same gait with which, now, he calmly proceeded down the street, heading for the church square, as if out for a stroll.

He'd walked on like that for, let's say, about a hundred meters when out came Langlois. He sent us a withering glance even though the gendarme and I were huddled like two little rabbits in our corner of the doorway. And then he followed the man.

And we followed his orders to the letter; and then the two gendarmes and I followed Langlois. So here we were spaced a hundred meters apart, strolling calmly, at the pace of the man there out in front, at the head of the line.

It was very early in the morning, but the blacksmith was already firing up his forge. When the man passed him, he was throwing his ashes in the snow. They greeted each other.

How can it be that the man behind him, with his cavalry coat and police cap, could have some sort of relationship with this man out for a morning stroll? Or with us, two hundred meters away, even less. Yet seeing that we were taking the same street on which he and I had first arrived, I wondered where we were going like that.

We passed the farm that, the previous day, had been the first to loom out of the solitude. It was there, with its snowy beret pulled down over one eye; exactly as it had been. But now the man and I were walking in the opposite direction. And Langlois with his police cap.

Again we went along the path through the forest. And sometimes a bend in the path would hide the man, and sometimes, Langlois. At one of these bends we found Langlois had stopped. When we reached him, he said, Halt!

There, in front of us, some fifty meters away, the man stood leaning against the trunk of a beech tree, looking at us.

We stayed like that for a short time, face-to-face across fifty meters. Then Langlois moved toward the man, step by step, until he was three steps away. Then, once again, they seemed to come to an unspoken agreement. And then, truly, at the moment we could no longer bear to be there, when we were about to shout "What on earth are you doing?" there was a loud detonation. The man fell. Langlois had shot him, twice, in the stomach; a gun in each hand, at the same time.

"It was an accident," he said.

When Langlois got back to our town, he found the resignation letter he'd begun to write; he added: "Regrettable lack of sangfroid on the job . . . worn-down pistol triggers, which should have been detected by a careful examination of the weapons, occasioned this terrible accident for which I have no excuse."

He put his letter in an envelope and sent it.

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I heard many things about this Langlois afterwards. At some point, more than thirty years ago, the stone bench under the linden trees was full of old men who knew how to grow old. This is how I've pieced together what they said to me.

"Here, work heals all wounds," they said, "and, a year later, in '46, we had to make a real effort to recognize Langlois when he came back. And it's true, he'd changed."

It was in late spring, at dusk. That very lovely dusk we often get around here: gentian blue and gold. We were preparing for our major summer projects and were poking around in the vegetable gardens in Pré-Villars, in the bend in the road to Saint-Maurice. Right there, the road emerges from a cut in the hillside, above a hollow where all the villagers have their vegetable gardens, and in order to reach the village, the road goes around this hollow, almost full circle.

At that hour and in that season, it wasn't a matter of work that had to be done quickly or that occupies your entire mind; we were simply digging small irrigation channels or else we were earthing up, which allows you to raise your head often. Especially on those beautiful velvet evenings.

That's how we saw a man on horseback emerging from the cut in the hollow, coming from Saint-Maurice. He was riding a splendid beast with a lot of spirit, prancing and neighing and quite at the command of the rider, whose legs allowed for a very pretty display, but no more. The rider wore a

redingote buttoned to the collar, tightly belted and without frogging, but his opera hat was of uncommon insolence. Its dimensions, its curves, its hide, the way it was cocked, tilting slightly onto the forehead, showed the skill it took to balance it as the horse bolted and swerved to the right: the hat was transformed into a good kick in the collective ass of everyone who was looking at it.

You can well imagine that we didn't take our eyes off him while he was turning with the road around Pré-Villars. We weren't used to such fandangle in our parts. We said to ourselves, "Now there's one!" One what, nobody knew, but he was one.

But he wasn't one: he was Langlois. We cheered him but he shut down the cheering before anyone could pat him on the shoulder, which is what everyone wanted to do. And he hardly spoke three words to Frédéric II, who was slapping his thighs at the sight of him. Three little words, and not hello or goodbye but something so unexpected that we couldn't say what he'd said. He turned on his heels, went into Sausage's kitchen, closed the door behind him, and through the windowpanes we could see him climb the stairs to the bedroom he'd occupied previously. Even Sausage stared at him in amazement.

And indeed he had changed. It wasn't a matter of disgrace or resentment, though. The very next day, still sporting his opera hat (about which we said, "Come now! He could have worn another hat for us!"), he paid a call on the mayor to whom he presented the documents naming him commander of the Louveterie.

So here were bizarre things again! Not long before we'd had a *lieutenant* of the Louveterie (he'd come with the mining engineer from La Mûre and a chocolatier from Grenoble, supposedly for a wild-boar hunt that, in the end, was only an excuse for a boys' night out), but a *commander*, now that was new. Besides, the lieutenant lived in Mens, which meant that, hierarchically speaking, a commander should live at the very least in Grenoble, right? And in the best neighborhood at that. Whereas this one (who was Langlois) told the mayor of his firm intention to live here, in our village.

We are not particularly prideful, usually; and even when there are occasions for pride, we mull them over a good dozen times before deciding if it's worth it. But this time, we were convinced it was worth it. Even though Langlois continued to take his room and board at Sausage's.

In any case, we learned that the redingote, although it had no frills, was made of broadcloth; that it could be replaced by a jacket of buffalo hide, softer than any cloth, while the breeches were of drugget from Montmélian or corduroy from Annecy to make you drool. He also had impeccable boots that he dirtied intrepidly, and that made his feet look smaller than a woman's; and above all there were three huge caps with earflaps—one made of a plain English wool, one of homespun, and one of otter skin—all of them much more to our taste than the opera hat that he nonetheless continued to wear on Sundays. In addition, there was a rumor going around that he was only at Sausage's temporarily and that he was planning to have a house built (a *Bongalove*, it was said) in a charming spot; well, in a spot where we never went, far above the low valleys, and from where it's possible to perceive, when it's time, the peddler's blue umbrella at least a week before he gets here.

The outfits were indisputable: we had seen them. As to the projects, they were not at all in harmony with Langlois's face. Back at the time of the event, he'd made a lot of speeches, whether to reassure us or to "give us an earful." Now, he hardly spoke. Frédéric II, for example: whenever they met, he greeted him simply with a wave of his hand, without a word. Frédéric II was dying to take him home for a drink and a talk about that night and that morning in Chichiliane, right? What do you think? And to pat him on the knee. And when people were hanging around in the church square to kill time or to let their animals drink, he'd pass by with nothing more than a quick word or two. Not that he was unsociable. The former Langlois, obviously, if someone had said to us that he's coming here to live, immediately we would have imagined that he'd play ninepins, bowls, or *manille*; we'd end up calling him, simply, Langlois. But, even if he wasn't familiar in that way, it's not like he held back or acted at all haughty; none of us ever thought that his rank had gone to his head. Often enough he'd stop with one of us, even Frédéric II. He would say, "So, how's it going?" That was all, of course; but after he'd been here for a month, we thought that wasn't so bad.

There are two words to describe him; one monastic and the other military. The first: "austere." He was like a monk who has to make an effort to drag himself away from where he is to come to where you are, who makes a show of laughing and speaking the way you do and is either too polite or too disdainful to surprise or unsettle you. The other word for what Langlois had become is "brusque." He was brusque like those people who don't feel obliged to explain the whys and wherefores to you; who have things to do other than wait for you to understand.

So there were these new clothes; but he still had his thin, silky, supple little mustache, and those dark, staring eyes that, more than ever, would bore a hole in whatever he was looking at. That's why, when we realized we'd have to take him as he was, that there was no hope of ever seeing him relax, and that this,

in fact, must have been his own way of relaxing and softening up, we accepted it, the way one accepts anything and everything here that must be accepted; that is, calmly. He'd done so much for us that it would have been easy to see us as ungrateful. Perhaps we were a tiny bit, but then, we also had things to do. In any case, every time he asked someone how they were doing, they'd answer amiably enough that they were doing fine.

We did, however, get to know the horse very well. The day after Langlois arrived, he took over an abandoned stable that belonged to the Café de la Route. Next to the dining room where Sausage stored her cases of beer. He dragged the cases under a lean-to and, without a word, Sausage cleaned it up that same day, then nailed boards all around it, leaving an opening for a door. Sausage also went to buy hay and feed. And in this stable Langlois installed his horse and his tack. He also spent the day sawing and nailing. We didn't know he was a commander. Though he'd already presented himself to the mayor, that information hadn't reached us yet. When it finally did and when, at the same time, everyone could see that commander sawing and nailing boards, installing curb chains, sweeping with a heather broom, hurling down pails of water, and, finally, sitting on the mounting block to prepare the harness, we found it all very congenial. And because, as I've explained, there were few occasions for us to be congenial to the man, we were congenial to the horse. Especially since the horse did everything to make it easy.

He was a black horse who knew how to laugh. Normally horses don't know how to laugh and you always get the feeling they're about to bite. This one warned you with a wink that he was about to laugh, and his laughter formed in his eye in a very distinct way. So that when it reached his teeth, there was no misunderstanding. The door to his stable was always unlocked. He was never tied up. When he wanted to go out or see people, he would push open his door and appear on the threshold from which he could gaze at the respectable folk out for a breath of fresh air beneath the lindens or going about their business. If he recognized someone he was particularly fond of, he would call to him with one or two modest whinnies, like a dove's coo. And if that person then looked up and said some soft words to him (as was always the case), the horse would draw close with friendly, even comical—purposefully comical—steps, precise and lively, and come to rest his head on the person's shoulder. That's when he would laugh sometimes, if you scratched his forehead a little or if he sensed his master was coming. And then the hand was withdrawn: no one knew if the commander would approve, so no one dared to continue stroking the horse; the horse, however, would start laughing softly and would place his forehead under the hand, on his own and without being asked. And Langlois would say to him, "Ah, you hussy!" (though he was a male and not a mare) and Langlois's voice was full of so much affection that you could almost believe it spread beyond the horse, extending to the person petting him and all the others who were there sitting on the stone bench under the linden; because, though Langlois said only those words, he glanced around at everyone. The horse did other things, all as kind as could be and all directed with real intelligence toward the need to love that everyone shares. He followed his friends. If he saw people going off to the tobacco shop or a neighbor's, to get tools or to borrow utensils, he would go with them, come up next to them, and rub his muzzle against their jackets; then, keeping pace with them, he would travel alongside, as if to spend a short time with someone he cared about. Sometimes, back then, he would amuse them with his little dove coo, or a little Spanish step, or by shaking his head and swirling his silky mane, always perfectly combed and shiny as a new penny. He was attentive to everyone. We could ask him for favors. At first, of course, we didn't dare; we were content simply to enjoy his kindness. We worried about Langlois's mood. Not that he would be in a bad mood but, like I told you, because he had almost no contact with us, we could hardly know if he would look kindly upon our using his horse. After a while, though, we realized that Langlois had let the horse roam free, that he understood his ways perfectly, and that, as a result, if the horse came out and offered us his harness to haul something up the Pré-Villars hill, or gave us the five minutes it took to cart a dump bucket from the fountain to the stable, there was nothing to do but accept these small favors as simply as he offered them.

Often, then, if the horse wasn't standing at the door of his stable waiting to greet his friends, and you needed him, you went in and asked, "You here?" He'd answer with his little dove call and he would come. No one knew his name. No one dared ask Langlois. And no one dared give him a name from our parts. All our horses were named Jewel or Belle. That didn't suit him at all. He was more respected and loved than that; much more esteemed. Everybody spoke to him tenderly, but it would have been nice to have a name to attach to our kind words, to slip it in here and there among the thank-yous, just to make him understand that we appreciated and cared for him. But to find a name that would suit him was beyond the realm of the possible; and to find out what Langlois called him was in the realm of impossible things. Langlois was nothing but impassivity and coldness when he took him out; just by using his knees, he made him obey. If ever he said anything to him, it was in private, it was none of our business, and we were reminded of that at every moment. So some just called him "horse"; but little by little, in secret,

and when we were sure nobody heard but us and the horse, we wound up calling him “Langlois” under our breath because, pure and simple, he did everything with us that Langlois didn’t.

The horse had only had one shortcoming: he was hard-hearted with other animals. He never laughed, never cooed, not with another horse, not with a mare. He didn’t even look at them. He would pass by them, aloof, to come to us. He loved above his station.

The day after Langlois arrived, he went to see the mayor to show him his letters patent. About a month later, he went again.

We got word of it from the Martoune woman, the sacristan I already told you about. “That little faker!” she said. “I could tell he was following me.”

Following that Martoune woman is no small feat. She’s seventy years old but that’s the least of it; she’s a hunchback, too, and her nose is so stuffed with snuff that her mouth has been open for thirty years; with, of course, all the havoc that the air here can wreak on a gaping mouth. A sight to see! Following Martoune in drugget knickers and boots as soft as a handkerchief! Ha!

“Laugh like the lummoxes you are,” she said. “If I’m telling you, it’s true. Why else would I bother?” In other words, she said she’d been watching his shenanigans. He’d station himself under the willows across from her door. It was, let’s say, a Tuesday. She went to stick her goat in the meadow. He watched her. She did a few chores. His eyes followed her everywhere. Sometimes he’d even come out of the shelter of the willow branches to follow her for real, keeping his distance, but step by step. Wednesday, Thursday, and Martoune, who’s no fool (if I told you about her youth . . .) notices that Langlois comes out from his shelter under the willows to follow her each time she heads toward the church. She says to herself, “Just you wait, young man!” And, indeed, Saturday, she was doing her cleaning in the church and, sure enough, that Saturday, Langlois follows her in. That Saturday, that’s all that happened. Saturdays, Martoune runs a damp cloth over the Holy Virgin and a dry cloth over Christ, who’s made of plaster and whose blood is seriously fading: the priest is always redoing the drops with a paintbrush. She sweeps under the chairs and then lines them up. But on Mondays, she “does the sacristy” as much as she can, from top to bottom. Which means not only does she brush, shake out, and hang up the clothes the priest wore on Sunday but she also airs out his entire wardrobe because the closet where it’s kept is in the north, beneath the shadow of the great oak: things grow moldy there very quickly.

On Monday, then, she had set out the four beautiful chasubles: the mauve one; the pink-and-green one with roses and leaves embroidered in gold thread, looking just like living roses (it was given to the parish in ’27 by the Présentine convent, where there are still extraordinary embroiderers); the gold one (so beautiful that the priest doesn’t dare wear it); and the cornflower blue and host-wafer white one—the everyday one (which is getting threadbare and which the Martoune woman pays careful attention to). And it was to do just that that she’d gone to the small grated window that looks out on the Carles meadow. Hearing a faint noise outside, she said to herself, “Ah! Here you are!” She stepped back from the window, and what should she see but a shadow going by, and by again, and finally a hand placing itself on the grate (this small window isn’t even as tall as a man; it reaches up to my chest, here). It was Langlois’s hand. She recognized his big silver ring.

Martoune is intelligent, like I told you, but perhaps not in every respect. In spite of her age, her hump, and her snuff, she’d gotten it into her head that she could play the wench. She stayed out of sight.

“Hey in there! What’s going on? Are you trying to make a fool out of me? Get yourself over here, now!” Langlois said in a voice that made Martoune leave her dark corner at once.

Langlois looked at the sacerdotal vestments on the backs of the prie-dieux.

“Are they all here?”

“Yes,” said Martoune.

“There aren’t any more?”

“No, there are only four.”

“Let me get a better look at that one,” said Langlois, slipping his index finger through the window bars and pointing toward the pink-and-green one.

And Martoune rushed to do it.

“And the gold one.”

She showed him the gold one; Langlois had framed his face in a barred square and was looking attentively.

“Now get me the monstrances.”

Oh, that! Never in her life, Martoune said, had she touched the monstrance; and in any case there was only the one, locked away in the tabernacle, and it was the priest who took care of it.

“On your honor?” asked Langlois, half jokingly.

“On my honor, Commander,” she said.

He seemed to raise an eyebrow at the title (she was flirting with him, like old people do). His eyes pierced through her with a couple of those nasty looks of his and off he went.

That very evening he set out to pay a visit to the priest. A visit about which we learned nothing. All we knew was that there are two hundred steps from the Café de la Route to the rectory; Langlois, having put on his fitted redingote and his fancy opera hat, saddled up his horse at three in the afternoon, mounted, and crossed those two hundred steps in his fancy uniform, checking his horse so tightly that the animal danced in place like a seahorse. Naturally this outing was a huge success with everyone.

We remarked, in fact, that Langlois stayed barely an hour at the rectory before the two of them, the priest and Langlois, came out and headed toward the church, which they entered. The horse, left to himself, returned to the stable without stopping with any of his friends; he simply greeted them as he went by with a little coo. Like us, he seemed puzzled as to what this cavalcade could possibly mean.

After a while, we got in the habit of saying that when it came to Langlois, nothing meant anything in particular.

That spectacular visit to the rectory, for example, meant absolutely zero, nothing, naught. He stays for barely an hour, but everyone knows that when you visit that priest, there's no escape; out the two of them come; and off they go to the church. And there they stay, oh, let's say, twenty minutes. (And we know what they did: the priest opened the tabernacle and showed him the monstrance, and that was that. Langlois took a look and, having looked, went on his way.) Twenty minutes; then Langlois left the church and a little later, so did the priest. And *barca*, the end, as Langlois would have said, for we never saw Langlois in church again, not for mass, not for vespers, not for anything. And afterwards, whenever he would meet the priest on the road or in the village, he greeted him the same way he greeted all of us: just a wave, not a word.

If we'd been nasty, rest assured we'd have had good reason. Because think about it: he'd done us a great favor. It seems to me we should have become fed up with his presence among us with his tight-lipped air. But then this air of his resembled to a tee the one he'd often put on at the time of the story, and it was just like he'd acted when he was trying to sort out true and false in the case of Delphin-Jules's death. And that, I have to say, brought out our better side because, when we thought about the previous winters, we still had a few icicles in our mustaches.

And then, something else needs to be said: Langlois seemed to be held in high regard by the people from below, that is, the bigwigs.

When we found out he was coming to live among us, in addition to that pride I mentioned (not that it took away from it; on the contrary), we said, "He must be in disgrace. They must have thrown him a bone and made him a commander because of his medals, his shirt-front, his elegance, and the way he glowered at you so you almost had to turn away; but they must also have wanted him to understand that the only commanding he would ever do was going to be in some backwater."

But no, on the contrary. Near summer's end a cabriolet came over the pass and it gleamed as if it had been polished with sword paste; we had been watching it climbing down through the trees for more than an hour, shinier than a scarab. And when it stopped in front of some of us who were harvesting, we saw the oddest thing: It was carrying on its back, behind the hood, a groom who got down to ask for some information: "Do any of you know Commander Langlois?" Well, you can understand that we're not going to answer on the spot when you spring a surprise like that on us right in the middle of harvesting. You have to think a bit whether you are going to say yes or no. And so while we stood staring at this little car that seemed to have just hatched from an egg and the groom who was glistening even more, out comes the boss, no doubt to help make up our minds. And we did, right away, because who was it but the royal prosecutor himself. No doubt about it: he was famous all the way to the most deserted mountain peaks, what with his white whiskers and the big bulging belly he carried a few steps in front of him like a drum; yes, that was him.

So we even gave him a little boy to lead him to the village, saying to ourselves, "When he finds out that his commander is lodging at Sausage's!" But when we get back from work, we see this prosecutor and our Langlois strolling beneath the linden trees on our little square, admiring our beautiful trees, pointing their canes toward the low country that can be seen in its entirety from way up there, almost straight down; pointing at some lovely farm below that they were talking about, or sketching out a few paths they'd gone down or meant to go down; well, thick as thieves. They dined together at Sausage's; she'd cooked up a tasty little meal.

Much later we gleaned something of what they'd been talking about that evening; whether it had been an ordinary visit, or an official one, and whether it had been made to a disgraced captain of the gendarmerie or to a Louveterie commander in good favor.

In fact, at a certain point, after the tragic end of the story I'm telling you, the woman called Sausage

got to where she couldn't contain her grief any longer and she started talking a blue streak to console herself, to bring everything back to life. She talked about Langlois; and the tone people use to speak about Langlois now, that is, this friendly tone I'm using to talk to you about him, comes largely from the woman called Sausage.

You never see the whole picture. If all we'd known was Langlois's haughtiness and his silence, we might have stayed bitter. Everything else, when you think about it, was so congenial! Not like the Langlois who berated Anselmie and (the least amusing part of the story) all the rest; it's a fate that awaits us all.

The royal prosecutor hadn't come to see the captain or the commander. More like (according to Sausage) a good friend; a friend who could be refused nothing. One time, this royal prosecutor who was so impressive even began to spout inanities. No doubt to cheer up our Langlois. "Beware the truth," said this prosecutor (so it seems), "it is true for everyone." (No need to go to school until you're twenty to figure that out.) And in fact, after this bon mot, Langlois did cheer up. It didn't take much, did it?

And then, they must have had business together. These prosecutors often made timber deals under the table (though those are unimportant prosecutors), or tanned fox and badger pelts just to add a few girandoles to the fancy balls they hold in their towns to marry off their daughters, so it seems. Because Sausage, without really acting like she didn't know what's going on, never missed a thing (how attentive she was around Langlois!), and she heard Langlois say, "Don't worry, everything passes through my hands."

That night they must have reached the decision whose results we would see a month later.

The Louveterie Corps, the Wolf-Hunting Corps, is an odd one. There are lieutenants who are fair and square and who work very hard, just like their equivalents in the Forestry Corps. They manage (or do their best) to destroy the "harmful" ones, but they have to protect the "helpful" ones too. I'm talking about animals. For example, the "harmful" are foxes, wild boars, badgers, stone martens, weasels, and obviously wolves: the bloodthirsty. The "helpful" are the mountain goats, bucks, does; stags, according to the season (mating or not), are alternatively classified as "harmful" or "helpful." I don't mean that the lieutenants take all that very seriously, but really, they should. In any case, above the lieutenants, there are captains and well, they don't lift a damn finger because their positions are purely honorary. For example, our risky high-mountain regions where the terrain isn't exactly suitable to the faint of heart teem with "harmful" animals: there'd never been a Louveterie captain there though. We stuck to a lieutenant, because we needed someone who knew how to handle a rifle, even on a weekday. (And don't forget there were bears at the Rousset pass and in the Lente forest; and wolves everywhere.) They put captains in the valleys, near Pontcharrat, or even farther north, all the way to Ugine, in areas, that is, where they were just "for show." They were generally very influential members of the electorate with ambitions; or else romantic lords of the manor of a sort. Being a Louveterie captain allowed them to have a certain *lifestyle*—and uniform. And they could prance around like little Caesars if they wanted—a fantastic emotional outlet that's useful to prefectural diplomacy as well.

If our royal prosecutor had wanted to spout more inanities, he could have spouted one that's true: there was too much *real* work to do for the Louveterie Corps ever to have dreamed of posting a captain here. Nevertheless, Langlois and the royal prosecutor dreamed about it, and they must have moved heaven and earth because, about a month after that famous dinner at Sausage's, we learned that our neighbor from Saint-Baudille, Urbain Timothée, had been named a captain of the Louveterie.

He wasn't an influential member of the electorate; you couldn't call him a romantic lord of the manor either. As a matter of fact, "romantic" was just a bit of an understatement. He was a "Guadalajara," as we call people here who've gone to Mexico to make a fortune. He'd come back rolling in pesos, no doubt about that, but he'd lost a couple of marbles in the process.

Physically speaking, he was a small man, no taller than a grasshopper's knee, compact and well proportioned, so much so that you would have thought he was a young lad if it weren't for his patch of gray goatee and the most extraordinary pattern of wrinkles ever worn on yellowing skin. Was he lively? Oh, he was; despite his sixty years, he was made of a kind of powder that exploded at every opportunity so that where he'd been a moment before, in front of you, now nothing was left but dust. He'd patch himself together, piece by piece, ready for another takeoff à la Jules Verne while you were still rubbing your eyes.

His wife was a Creole woman older than he was, still beautiful and languid like a late afternoon in June.

At first, people here considered her uncivilized, but she wasn't, not at all. She'd come, it was said, from a very famous Spanish convent that provided an education to all the daughters of good families in Mexico, in an odd spot for young girls, it was said, right by a volcano and a glacier. But about those

things from another world, you know, we spouted a lot of nonsense. But I do know that when Madame Timothée (we called her Madame Tim) came to the area (she was close to sixty; she looked twenty, well, let's say thirty), she was much talked about. Just imagine: this woman of cerulean marble, with eyes that took forever to blink; like the setting sun! That's when the rumor about the convent near the volcano began, I'm sure of it. Before that, I think people had only spoken about snow. I even think it was Madame Tim herself who deliberately spread the rumor.

"Tell them," she said, "that it is very high, very high, higher than here." And just hearing her pronounce those "very high, very high, higher" and the slow, supple rumbling of her throat, like the secret call of ewes, was enough to make you believe whatever rumor she wanted you to. She was afraid she'd be mistaken for a woman from the hot deserts.

But there was no risk of that because when she got here she still had her five children with her, and what a marvel! We've seen enough to know that no woman from the hot deserts would snuggle up to her children like that!

Here her three daughters spent the three or four years needed to make them marriageable and got married; of the two boys, one died on a long journey in Austria, the other held a position in Paris. After seven or eight years, around the time I'm telling you about, Madame Tim was a grandmother many times over. The daughters all had good situations in the plains below.

You'd regularly see a messenger going down the paths from Saint-Baudille and then you'd see a load of nannies and children climbing back up. The eldest daughter alone had six children. Madame Tim's messenger was under orders to go to all three households and collect the lot of them.

The festivities never stopped: afternoon snacks for the children in the maze of box hedges; rides on muleback through the grounds; games on the terraces; and, if it was raining, to calm the ants in the pants of all the children, all kinds of shindigs in the château's vast attics. And then the floors would rumble like distant thunder from the leaping and racing around.

Whenever the opportunity arose, whether on the way back from Mens (where the road passes a corner of the château grounds) or returning on an autumn day from a bit of rabbit hunting, that is, whenever you were on the summits overlooking the maze of box hedges, you couldn't resist gazing at all the fun going on. Especially since Madame Tim was always the drum major.

She was sumptuously clothed in a heavy wool dress over enormous petticoats that pleated and unpleated around her statuesque body with each step she took. She embellished her big bosom with linen frills. Seeing her in the middle of that vatful of children holding several in each hand like bunches of grapes while the others splashed around her, she was irresistible! Behind her, the nannies still carried the newborns in their white cocoons. Or else, if you stood on tiptoe and craned your neck to see over the hedge, you'd catch her in the middle of a bucolic picnic, distributing slices of cake and glasses of fruit-syrup drinks, flanked on the right by a male servant in blue (the son of Onésiphore from Prébois), who carried the keg of orangeade, and on the left by a female servant in violet and white (the granddaughter of old Nanette from Avers), who held the basket of pastries. It was a sight to behold!

And if she happened to notice you—when, for example, the look of astonishment in some little girl's eyes made her demand to know what she was staring at—then Madame Tim would call out to you and you had no choice but to obey. And for you it wasn't orangeade but a glass of wine that Onésiphore's son was sent running to fetch. And that was that; there was no way you could leave; right away you had two or three children on each knee asking you to tell them a story.

But we don't know any stories and even if we did, we wouldn't know how to tell them.

And we were glad to be there, next to Madame Tim, so respectable despite the volcano and the glacier (or perhaps because of them).

"Enjoy life!" she said to us. "Enjoy life, it's the only thing to do. Make the most of everything. Look at me, how I make the most of it all!" And, with a slow, precise gesture, she would grab some grandchild, press him gently to her breast, and caress him until mouth, limbs, and laughter were busting out all over; and when at last he lay there split open like a sliced peach, she'd lift him to her lips with those admirable arms of hers in order to give him a kiss.

You can of course understand that to have a Louveterie captain with this woman for a wife suited us just fine.

We got the news before the people concerned. Someone had gone to Grenoble, I can't remember why, and brought back the gossip. Everyone was in favor of it, of course, though some said it was true and some said it wasn't.

And Langlois listened to us. When one fine day he mounted his horse at two in the afternoon, we said to ourselves, "That's it, he's going there with his letters patent!"

"Oh, no," others said. "He's not wearing his opera hat."

And it's true. He was wearing his buffalo jacket and his otter cap because it was late October.

Nonetheless, it was the road to Saint-Baudille that he took. We went to the little square with the linden trees so we could watch him from above. He was heading in that direction at a quick pace.

I have the feeling he was having a bit of fun at our expense that afternoon: his path led down toward the Ébron River and naturally we started looking out for him at that stretch of road that reappears just beyond the river. And after we'd calculated the time you needed to go down to the river, cross the bridge, and come up on the other side, we still didn't see him. So once again we were arguing about those letters patent, that opera hat, that otter cap, when somebody shouted, "Look! He's over there!"

And he pointed his finger away from the road, toward the meadows to the right, and there Langlois was, climbing through the fields toward the château, waving his handkerchief at us.

"Damn stubborn fool!" we said to ourselves, quite pleased with these signals he was sending us with his handkerchief that were, when it comes down to it, friendly. Why was he so nice from a distance and so nasty up close?

It seems he came back very late, and that evening, according to Sausage, he spoke his first kind word. She'd had to stay up and, even when the last customer had left, she'd had to wash the glasses, then wash the bottles, then dry the glasses, then put the bottles to drain; finally, she'd come to her doorstep to gaze out on the sleeping village and the square with its linden trees murmuring like a cool stream. She stood face-to-face with a hundred thousand stars.

She heard trotting but was too caught up in her mindless bliss to have the immediate presence of mind to go in and up to her room; she only thought of it when it was too late: there in the square was Langlois.

"Why aren't you in bed?" he said.

She didn't answer and they went in. She had already done so much that she merely lingered on while Langlois stabled his horse. She said to herself, "I'll bring him his candle. He won't bite me!" Obviously not, quite the contrary! He said to her, "It's been a long time since we've discussed the ways of the world, hasn't it, old girl! And yet," he added, "the world keeps on turning. Faster and faster, you might even say."

And yes, he'd gone to Saint-Baudille; and it had been for the letters patent; and yes, Urbain and Madame Tim had been appointed captains of the Louveterie.

This Louveterie was beginning to take on genuine importance for us. It was with a unanimous voice—an inner voice—that we decided in any case we would call Madame Tim the Captainess. Urbain . . . well, we'd have to see. It would depend on his explosiveness. We'd need at least enough time to see his uniform.

But, strange as the decision was, the people who'd made it had a first-rate knowledge of men. It seems that Urbain was only waiting for this decision to solidify himself. He sent for the tailor from the Twenty-eighth Regiment of the Chasseurs d'Afrique and had him bring his weapons and luggage to Saint-Baudille. The tailor stayed for a week during which he did two very different things: he spent his days sewing and adjusting the uniform; he spent his evenings teaching Onésiphore's son how to play the hunting horn. They would go up to the highest terraces and the October wind would blow belches, farts, and sighs to break the heart of a winded Jeremiah down our way. Ah! We were quite worried about all that for a while until, on the third day, with an October wind as heavy as honey and dark wine, we heard some beautifully modulated husky notes ring out. Onésiphore had finally given up, ceding his place to Pierre-le-Brave from Ponsonnas, a former player in a brass band who knew all the instrument's secrets.

Maybe you think that, because Urbain was knee-high to a grass-hopper, his uniform must have looked clownish on him? Not at all. Remember Madame Tim. She had a keen eye and saw to everything. Monsieur Tim was dressed in a small jacket à la Zouave that made his chest swell just a bit, and long trousers with stirrups, trousers that fit tightly around the calves and thighs, right up to a leather belt that rode a little high on the waist. All this made him seem taller than in real life. The uniform was made of Elbeuf cloth, smooth to the touch, the color of a dried leaf. His head wear was a small Tyrolean felt hat with a pheasant feather.

"Absolutely no fancy stuff," said Madame Tim to the tailor from the Twenty-eighth Regiment who wanted frogging, lanyards, and epaulettes.

She didn't even want the three stripes of his rank to be wider than a pencil.

What she'd done was well done and practical, too: for copses, mountains, horse riding, for rain or snow, you could put gaiters or boots over the trousers and a cape over the jacket; and good for show, a Tyrolean felt hat with a pheasant feather inevitably flatters its man.

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The dark time of snow, cold, and vague apprehensions returned. We were fretful. It wasn't easy to forget

those days of being like sheep in a pen for Monsieur V. That's when it was reassuring to see a light in Langlois's window.

In fact, Langlois had work to do. It was obviously no longer a matter of extraordinary things; it was, on the contrary, a matter of the most ordinary things in the world. And of his new role.

That year the weather paid special attention to the shaded parts here. Around Rousset and the Lente forest, the small dark valleys of Bouvante and Cordéac were squeezed as if in a screw press by frost that crushed anything alive or made everything spurt out. Farmers in Avers reported seeing wolves.

At first those wolves had come trotting soundlessly around the houses. They snatched a goose, demolished a rabbit hutch, maimed a goat, even sniffed at the heels of a man carrying the mail on foot, and finally played a little night music. In the stables, the cows and horses made a racket as they danced to the tune.

Since we had a Louveterie commander and captain, what was the point of putting up with this?

"Of course," said Langlois, and he destroyed three or four of them with his rifle.

They were young: two-year-old wolves, already quite strapping, that until then had had their pick of whatever they pleased in the Golconde forests where no one tussled with them over the huge white hares and the wild geese. Here, obviously, things are different: our geese aren't wild and we don't want anyone acting like they are. And then, we have lambs, kids, and calves, which makes us very vulnerable.

Langlois's rifle shots made that clear. The remaining young wolves got the message. They were, in any case, big enough to track long distances; now, going to or coming back from the hunt, they were content to stop to the edge of the woods to insult the village at length.

But there weren't only the young wolves.

One night, the hay bag that blocked the dormer window in Fulgence's stable was yanked out, torn to shreds, and in the morning, what a sight! The horse and cow had had their throats slit and a bit of each of them had been eaten. Thirteen lambs had been disemboweled for the sheer thrill, it seemed, of sinking teeth in wool. A fourteenth had been carried off. So it wasn't a question of young wolves anymore. We were dealing with someone who didn't care a whit whether or not he was a character in one of La Fontaine's fables. This was the work of an old pro, and maybe one with another mouth to feed.

And, judging from the leap he'd had to make with a lamb in his teeth to climb back up to the dormer window, he was not a gentleman you'd want to meet in a dark alley at night.

And all of this had happened without a sound, which was a sign of prodigious self-confidence.

Nevertheless, Langlois trailed him alone for three days.

"He's having his fun with us," Langlois said at last to Sausage, and he smoked four or five pipes in a row sitting by the stove.

"Do you have a Sunday dress?" he asked Sausage next.

"Of course."

"Show me."

By this time, we already knew that nothing meant anything when it came to Langlois. She invited him to her room and opened her trunk. It was even a very beautiful Sunday dress, not meant for these parts, so no one had ever seen it; but, if what they say is true, it wouldn't have dishonored the Tuileries.

"Perfect," said Langlois.

Double-quick, he summoned the lieutenant and his *piqueur* here and put them on guard duty in Avers. Then he went off to Urbain's. That same evening, on the terraces of Saint-Baudille and in the areas of Avers where the lieutenant was posted, a truly magnificent dialogue of hunting horns began. Even though you knew what they were, once in a while the sounds were so hoarse they gave you goose bumps —that music was full of ancient menace.

Those hunting horns: what an invention!

I know what I'm talking about. Those fantasias so terrified the woods around Avers, more than the two sentries ever could have, that Langlois had time to take care of his business . . .

I imagine he was the one who set up those evening duets; those nocturnal calls with so much anguish; those responses with even more anguish; those dialogues of grand, bitter, despairing voices raised in conversation above the woods; those little dawn reveilles that sounded like a timid horseman trotting in place with no way out. All of that was, in the end, a bit militaristic if you look deep enough into it. But faced with the wolves I'm talking about, there was hardly time to split hairs.

What followed, obviously, was of the same order. But don't you forget (not that anyone would call us worldly, with our forests, our mountains, our north wind that makes your nose piss like a fountain, our mud that rises from our shins to our knees and from our knees to our heads) that we adore ceremonies. When life demands a ceremony, we have ceremonies that it is wise not to neglect or ignore. Just try being husband to a godmother without carrying a beribboned cane! If you are a best man, don't think of

mentioning the bridesmaid's snuffbox. And don't try harvesting the fields without festooning the horses' breasts with the obligatory sprays of straw. Or slicing the bread without cutting the sign of the cross into the loaf! And I could go on and on until tomorrow. So for those mysterious works carried out in the regions that skirt sorrow and death, why wouldn't there be an even more demanding ceremony? And, after everything I've told you, why not admit that Langlois was qualified to set it in motion?

And you have to acknowledge it was done in a masterly fashion.

That cold, silent face, and those eyes looking beyond the mountain at who knows what, no doubt hid some calculating instinct. Within the hour we learned that, as a service provided by the commune, there would be a wolf hunt under Langlois's direct orders; that the captain, and especially the Captainess, would take part, not from the balcony but in the ranks; that the legendary royal prosecutor, invited by special messenger, had dropped everything to join us; that he was at a staging inn in the village, having spent the previous night in Monétier; that, it seemed, he'd never carried his belly so quickly; that of course we shouldn't expect to see him laugh; that he had, on the contrary, a rather surly air about him, but this was a trait inherent to his position so there was no call for worry.

That's not all: eleven hunting horns were to be distributed among the lines of beaters; the Captainess's outfit was a marvel, it was said. Imagine this woman in the snow! Finally, that very evening we were to gather at the school hall where Langlois in person would bring us up to speed on the roles we were to play.

By six we were all already there, eighty men: father, sons, brothers, and grandfathers, thrilled to hear how familiar our Langlois was with all the names of our localities: small valleys, peaks, alpine huts and sheep pens, and our most secret trails. Not a single slipup, not one unnecessary word, not one forest mistaken for another: everything in its place, each route marked out worse than for a royal inspection. Every step mapped ahead of time, every halt for rest indicated, every call of the horns marked not only at the exact minute when but also in the very spot where they were to sound.

And if we he'd thought our Langlois had forgotten our names, ha! Not on your life. Our names and our parentage (which we hold so dear) rolled off his tongue!

"So and so, son of so and so, father of so and so, will be at such and such a place at such and such a time. Baculard will be on his left." (He specifically said the son, and was even more specific: I say the son because I know that the son . . .)

And then, it wasn't only names and parentage, but the particular traits of each man, his most secret talents.

"I say the son because I know that the son can easily lift a one-hundred-and-twenty-liter barrel of plonk by himself and, at that exact spot, I need a man with a strong back because . . ." and he would explain why.

As if Baculard (the son) would have missed his spot by a millimeter or a second! You could have heard a pin drop. We devoured Langlois with our eyes. That was a man!

I don't think anyone slept much that night. With open eyes, we dreamed about our routes he'd traced so precisely that we could see them in every detail as if they were in front of us: the corners and fringes of the woods, the clearings, the glades; with open eyes we dreamed about that man who knew us like the back of his hand and who never consented to give us a smile.

In the morning, everyone was standing at the ready, polished, perfect. Louis-Philippe could have come on hands and knees begging us for a favor, we would have sent him packing. And how!

We saw a sleigh from Saint-Baudille arrive, pulled by three horses. Empty save for a simple blanket of Tibetan goatskin, but what a blanket, oh! Forty kilos! You'd think the sleigh was carrying snow. Collars, sleigh bells, and tassels on the horses' browbands. On the driver's seat, Bouvard with his mustaches. A master driver! Taking the turn through the lindens on the square at full trot; taking the turn so that the runners trace a circle as if with a compass. Coming to a dead stop right in front of the Café de la Route.

And what do we see next? Sausage!

What a shame that at that moment no one could remember her real name. It wasn't Sausage, that's for sure!

But what name could you use? All we could say was "Milady," since we didn't remember her name. And she was a lady. Truly! It was no longer a question of sixty years old, or fifty, or seventy, of the Café de la Route or anything else. It was a matter of something we're very sensitive to. A matter of knowing your trade well.

The woman who came out of the Café de la Route was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, a first-class worker in the business of being a woman. Let the queen and the queen of queens come! Sausage had been among us for at least ten years, and for at least ten years we'd been seeing her: enormous, flabby, with a trace of beard even, her age all too evident (I forgot how old she was because I was thinking of

how she looked as she got ready to climb into the sleigh). Not that she'd been foolish enough to disguise herself in youthfulness; I'm talking about knowing your trade. She'd retained her age, she'd kept her big bulges; she hadn't tried to corset herself to death or to falsify anything. She'd simply made use of what she had. Which is the sign of a good worker. And what good use! She was just a tiny bit sassy, and that was fine: her sturdiness, thickness, heaviness, old age, and the desperate tenderness of her eyes and her gloved hand. And naturally, a dress that dazzled you: moirés, velvets, satins, laces, and even, despite her natural corpulence, a hint of a bustle that made her look a little like a pheasant.

And so she was perfectly at ease climbing into the sleigh that Madame Tim had sent for her. And Bouvard, who knew her like the back of his hand—he was a pillar of the Café de la Route to whom she'd served at least two thousand brandies and five thousand coffees and with whom she'd played cards and traded curses—Bouvard came to cover her with the Tibetan goatskin blanket. And (we devoured her with our eyes, as you can imagine) she did not display indifference like someone forcing herself to be indifferent; and she wasn't overfamiliar like a woman who was still a hussy at heart. You know what she did? Well, with a beautiful smile for her old pal Bouvard, who was making her snug under the Tibetan goatskin, she gave a sweet pat of her gloved hand to the huge gloves that went on busying themselves about her.

Then off she went toward Saint-Baudille. Morning was breaking, all this having occurred in the smoky half-light of seven o'clock, in the scent of the pinecones that our women were lighting in the hearths. We hadn't worried about our households that morning; our thoughts were turned only to our assigned routes, to the way Langlois had been able to recite our parentage to us, and to our clothing that was, I have to say, all our Sunday best even though we were about to trek through the forest. Do you have to be told that our Sundays are made of homespun and leather? They can easily tolerate tears and cuts from any number of coppices.

A greenish light, a touch of north wind, northwest weather, omens of what would be called here, at this time of year, a nice day. I mean, what you others would call not fit for man nor beast. A gentle but icy wind, hard snow in the open spaces, soft snow in the sheltered areas, in the vales and the combes, and at the southern edge of the woods. Moderate visibility (what is called here very good visibility), the cloud flutters and rises a few meters above your head before dropping back down and scraping the ground; for an instant, we see clearly; then, when the cloud sinks again, we know enough to go on as if we can still see clearly. And you can bet that when the cloud rises again, I'll be able to find, at first glance and in their new spots, the things (people and animals) that had moved under cover of fog. A question of habit. Which I say not only to put things in perspective but also to make you understand that, for a sensible person, the outfit of "That Woman from the Café de la Route" wouldn't have made any sense. But then what sense does anything make?

Was there any sense to what we saw happen next? (We were getting the spears ready and a few men were greasing their boots, which should always be done in the cold and not the heat like people think. In reality, we were waiting for the watchword; no, in reality we were waiting for Langlois.) There we were, all eighty-three men from here, standing about at seven in the morning on an unusual Sunday, and what happened? The legendary royal prosecutor is what happened. Don't you think there must have been (at least) fifty trials in which it would have made sense for him to weigh in, instead of being here like this? There was no lack of trials at the time; and, if this royal prosecutor deserved his reputation, the reputation of having a "deep knowledge of the human heart" (so the paper said), of being a "lover of souls" (we had retained the words), if he really deserved that reputation, then surely it was as a prosecutor that he should have been preparing to know, deeply, the human heart. And not here. What was going on here? A wolf hunt. Obviously a bit militaristic. And nothing special! But speak of the devil! He's coming! He's here!

It was no mean feat for him to descend from his carriage! Finally he tumbles out all at once and then, talk about a belly that he carried like a drum! He was wearing a cartridge belt around his waist, making him look three times fatter than usual! And that buckle! Those gaiters on his legs! There's no describing those legs!

Well, you never can tell. But I've *never* seen a man more solid than this great lump. And I'm speaking now from memory; his companions in the hunt never got one step ahead of him. Everything they did—mountain people that they were—he, the royal prosecutor, did as well, at the same time, at the same speed, the same way they did, not withstanding his age and the whole *library* he housed in his eyes and in which, that evening, I saw the deep knowledge people talked about—and the sadness!

But just then, he wasn't sad; he was irritated. Langlois must have been watching for him from behind his curtains because he was downstairs as soon as the prosecutor arrived.

Langlois? We all took a step toward him. And we must have worn questioning looks, somewhere

between pleasure and displeasure. Because of everything. Because of that unusual Sunday. Very unnerving, an unusual Sunday! What do you cling to when there's no more routine?

Langlois? Oh, I have to say, when it comes to something to cling to, Langlois made a fine piton! And we were reassured: His bearing was calm, as if he knew where he was going. He showed not the slightest trace of worry, to the point that (it was as obvious as the nose on your face) even the legendary royal prosecutor was puzzled.

We got the sleighs in the blink of an eye. They were ready. Do you think we would have stood blustering in front of that door from which the "austere and brusque man" (like I said) was about to emerge if the sleighs hadn't been ready to arrive at the drop of a hat? There were fifteen of them, harnessed with two horses, or one, and even a few with oxen. No matter: we would be going at a walk. Three horses and a gallop are for ladies or the sons of archbishops. We had work to do.

A league from the village, we left off some soldiers. They were to fan out as skirmishers on command, following last night's directions in the schoolroom. They were placed at a point that blocked the three small valleys through which we would need to clear our way next. Again and again, Langlois gave us precise instructions. With a few words warmer than brandy he would remind us of the hamlets we would come to, the ones we would pass at such and such a time, and others at such and such a time, constantly checking his pocket watch. Then he had us take the empty horse cart with us.

It was like this all the way to Saint-Baudille. I was dropped off at my designated spot, along with Romuald and Arnaud Firmin. A hundred meters to our left we had Félix Petit, Bouscarle, and Ravanel (the son); a hundred meters to our right we saw Frédéric II, Ravanel (the father), and Moutte (the son). And in front of us the Chalamont valley opened out.

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Where am I? What's happening to me? It was a very odd morning. At one time or another, almost all of us had come face-to-face, alone, with the depths of solitude or some deep lair where a wild beast defends the scrap of warmth it has made for itself by tucking its thighs under its belly. This wasn't the first time we'd contended with the winter forests and, to tell the truth, the Chalamont valley is only a little denser, a little darker, and a little more disreputable than the others.

And afterwards? Who doesn't have it in him? I mean, so many times we'd already confronted those landscapes on our own. And when you're alone, don't you think you always find a way to accept your situation, to overlook all sorts things? But that time was odd, with those groups of three or four scattered all along the edge of the woods, at a hundred meters distance in the snow, controlling every way out. All very visible. There was no place to admit any guilt. So what to do? Smoke a pipe.

Let's say we stay there for an hour, and then the horn bearer turns up. We were being well taken care of: it's Pierre-le-Brave in person. We say, "Hey, now we know we're the finest!"

He explains that it isn't a question of music—our three groups are right at the center of the whole business.

"This thing here," he says, patting his instrument, "is a telegraph machine today."

Fine. A telegraph. Apparently there was, over by Langlois, another professional horn player who knew how to "make brass sing." Which is how Langlois intends to give us our orders. That seemed pretty good to us. Especially since he'd sent us Pierre-le-Brave so we could answer.

"Won't you play us a few fantasias?" we asked.

"If it's worth it," he said, "why not?"

Well, we would make sure it was worth it. Can't you see our Langlois, over there, and somewhere at his side no doubt is the Captainess. (And all of a sudden we also thought about, finally!, the lady from the Café de la Route! . . . Where was she? Over there? With the high society? It was a mystery.) But to get back to the point, can't you see our Langlois over there as he suddenly hears a top-quality fanfare from over here and says to himself, "Oh, the bastards!" (And as he says that, he sees us, he knows it's us.) "Ah, the bastards! Those are real men!"

Then, from over near Saint-Baudille, a sound like the bellowing of a calf reached us, to which Pierre-le-Brave responded in kind.

"There you go," he said. "That meant 'onward' and I answered 'all right.' "

Then we signaled with our arms to the groups on the left and on the right who were wondering what those calf sighs meant; and everyone fanned out in skirmishing position and began to climb toward the woods.

Just before we got there, we pulled out of our game bags the big wooden noisemakers with which we replace the church bells at Easter.

Hey, I was just struck by another idea. We went into the woods. Silence and solemnity. Perfectly clear

signs that we had no damn business in such a place. And what business had brought us here?

I could see Romuald, Félix Petit, and a little farther away Ravanel (the father), on the other side of Ravanel (the son); fir trunks covered in nielloed frost and leaves fat with snow hid Frédéric II from me; I could imagine the long line of skirmishers in the woods and each of them like me, slithering along snakelike while looking right and left, noisemaker in hand. Pierre-le-Brave had put his horn to his mouth. And, from a distance, above the treetops, once again the sigh of a calf with a bad cold flew to us like a bird. So Pierre set off his own fanfare, and it rang in our ears, through our avenues, echoing in the trees touching us and deep in the small valley across the way. And together everyone began to make our big noisemakers crackle, to crush the silence and the solemnity.

And what if I told you that just then we straightened bolt upright like a horse being pricked from behind? So we raced ahead and the more noise there was, the more we wanted to make, and we would have been capable (perhaps) of tearing a wolf apart with our teeth. In any case, the desire was there. And worse than the desire: while that horn was blowing, and the noisemakers were crackling, we had our eyes on the underbrush to see if the black-and-red snout and gaping maw of a wolf wasn't going to burst out. We looked at each other furtively and I don't know what kind of gaze I had, but I know what kind of gaze the others had on me. Yes, me. Who never hurt a fly.

Silence and solemnity. Thinking about it now, well, the royal prosecutor's famous inanity, the one that Sausage had heard, the thingamajig about the truth, it wasn't as inane as all that. Silence and solemnity —perhaps it was just a pause before the truth exploded.

Could I tell you I was thinking all that? Of course not; it came to me little by little. In any case, we weren't there to think.

The Chalamont valley, already at its fringes, was amazingly dense with vegetation. Even if we thought that with all the racket we were making the rapscallion—or rapscallions—must have hightailed it out of there, we were wary nonetheless.

It's commonly thought foxes are the wily ones. It's wolves that are. Cruelty, you see, inspires. The wolf is crueler than the fox and thus much wilier. A fox's malice evaporates. But the malice of a wolf! Around here we say "Spot the wicked wolf, shout with all your might," meaning that a wolf is so clever, so direct, so swift, and so unhesitating (so cruel, too) that you let out a shout of terrified surprise, and it also means that you only shout once, because before you can shout again, usually you already have teeth sunk in your skin. Wolves like the one or ones we were looking for might well say to themselves, "They think fear will make us leave, but no; fear will make us stay." And then, only three steps away, the wolf leaps out and dazzles us, smashing through the line, before getting the hell out of here. That Langlois! . . .

But there wasn't much risk. We were fantastic grenadiers.

Till noon, everything is fine, or just about. That is, we walk, we work our noisemakers, we don't see anything. Every now and again, above the woods, comes that sigh of a calf with a bad cold whose nostrils Langlois is stroking.

And depending on how this calf sneezes, it means: "Is everything all right? Did you see anything? Are you respecting the assigned route?"

And Pierre-le-Brave answers for us: "Yes, everything's fine. No, we haven't seen a thing. Yes, we're respecting the assigned route." And we hear from hither and yon the others responding in kind.

At noon we grab a quick bite. Pierre-le-Brave sums up the situation based on the morning's horn blowing: no one saw a thing; the woods are empty. And we take off again.

The afternoon light quickly grows dim and we start seeing things that don't exist. Twenty times Pierre puts his horn to his lips; twenty times we say to him, "Hold your fire." Doesn't bode well. We were deep in the thickets of the Chalamont valley where nothing but copses seemed to leap away from each other. Our eyes were tired.

Suddenly, exactly the opposite of what we were expecting occurred. Right in front of us, we saw a gray, sideways movement, like the swaying branch of a fir tree. We didn't pay much attention to it; we continued moving forward, never imagining that this fluid motion could be anything other than the sleepy gesture of a bough freeing itself of its snowy burden. Only when we arrived at fresh tracks, deep and terribly big, did our imaginations really go to work.

"This time," said Pierre-le-Brave, "I think I can sound a sighting."

"Not that we've seen much," we said, "but there is this: tracks that show a long leap and, beyond that, dark branches in the thicket that something or someone has knocked clean of snow."

So Pierre-le-Brave stationed himself (it was worth the trouble) to sound a magnificent sighting, and he repeated it twice because the whole line of snipers had instantaneously fallen silent.

Right away, triumphant orders came back to us. The friend blowing the horn for Langlois wasn't at a

loss for words. If until then there'd been nothing but the sighs of a calf, now there was, how can we put it, the great orator Bossuet in person. Bossuet the commander in chief! Bossuet at Austerlitz! What cheers came to us from that brass mouth! And what orders!

Pierre listened attentively.

"Here we go, my little lambs," he said. "You three groups I'm the telegraph for, stick to the assigned route and move forward. The other groups will join up with us."

No question about it, it was beautifully staged. We shouted the news to the group on the right and to the group on the left who had to push deep into the dense inscrutability of the Chalamont valley. Pierre answered Langlois: "All right, that'll work." And we did what was called for to make it work.

The ways of the world.

Harder than you'd think. In any case, full of surprises.

We were clearheaded enough to know that if we continued on the route that had been laid out for us step by step, we would run smack into the bottom of the Chalamont valley; that is, right into a vertical cliff: a wall. It remained to be seen what would be driven up against that wall: back to the wall and facing us. But if the others were going to join up with us as Pierre had said, and if the fresh tracks didn't lie, and the gray sideways slink we'd glimpsed came from something real and not just from the feebleness of our eyes, well, it wasn't hard to guess what finally awaited us at the bottom of the Chalamont valley.

And it wasn't hard to predict in what state that thing, that animal, that person would be. The braying that fell from the sky over Saint-Baudille fanfare after fanfare. And out of the woods, in response, those gasping horn gasps, and the constant crackle of our noisemakers: for hours he'd had all that in his ears.

I told you what those noises did to our ears, but the two situations can't be compared. We weren't prey of any sort; on the contrary. What filled us with energy must have filled him with anger. By now, he must no longer have been wolflike (you can see wolves in pictures; I even remember an illustration to *Michel Strogoff* in the *Veillée*, and lord knows the artist meant to show it to advantage), well, in spite of all that, you sense that they're beasts you can come to terms with, if not with words then with a rifle in any case. One day I came face-to-face with a wolf; he was alone and so was I; well, we managed to come to an agreement through mutual dread. But our *Gentleman*—by now he could hardly have been a wolf. Do you know how I imagined him? It's completely absurd. I imagined him as an enormous, raw-skinned ear in which all our music turned to venom, but the ear wasn't really the wolf. No, this ear was like a funnel stuck in the tails of a thousand vipers, every one of them as fat as your arm, and this venom was crammed into these vipers like blood in a blood sausage. That's what I imagined awaiting us at the bottom of the Chalamont valley.

In any case, at the bottom of the valley—well, it didn't seem like anything was going to happen anytime soon. But we had to pay close attention; the line of skirmishers had closed around us. We were at most ten meters apart. We had to search under every bush as meticulously as if we were gathering mushrooms and to be as careful as possible not to cede a single inch and let him cross the line. We'd been treated to a full minute of calf bellows on this subject that made Pierre open his eyes wide. "Really," he said, "I hope it doesn't happen to me."

All that's fine and dandy, but one step at a time does not make a gallop and, before we got to the very bottom, there was still at least another kilometer to go when darkness, which had already been threatening for quite some time, swallowed us up.

Outside the woods you could still see a little ways, but not here. A critical moment. Success was hanging by a thread. But the truth is, we've got as many instincts as beasts. Here's how things stood in Chalamont at the exact moment night fell. I'll explain it to you quickly. Look, the cigarette paper that you're creasing there, before you put in the tobacco, that's how it was: a long thin channel with steep walls. On this side of the cigarette paper, a whole line of skirmishers. On the other side, a whole line of skirmishers; at the entrance to the channel, the rest of us: Félix Petit, Romuald, the Ravanels (one Ravanel had come from the right, one from the left), Frédéric II, in other words, some ten men blocking the entrance. At the rear of the channel, on this side of your cigarette paper, the Chalamont valley bottom, the wall. And in your cigarette paper, not completely cornered but without much room to maneuver between the wall and us, and having understood what was going on, see, having now really grasped what was happening: our *Gentleman*!

The whole thing seemed to be in the bag—Langlois had foreseen everything. Except the night.

Instinctively we drew closer together and we said to Pierre-le-Brave, "Hurry, signal! Go ahead!"

And he does. They respond. "Here's what it's saying," said Pierre. "It's saying: 'Hold tight. I'm on my way.'" And though I didn't understand everything, I could tell from the way the other guy rushed through his notes that the commander must have been exultant: exultant and angry. It was like he was promising so much that I didn't know whether to jump for joy or die of fright.

“In any case,” we said, “if you do need to trumpet, don’t blow toward the Chalamont. The echoes bounce all over the place and now is no time to terrify the *Gentleman*.”

We even tamed our crackling noisemakers a little.

For about twenty minutes, we marked time. At last, deep in the woods, we saw the tips of flames materialize. They were bringing us torches. “That’s not a bad idea,” we said, and we smiled as we looked toward the beast.

And you can see why, with those torches out there, our *Gentleman* wasn’t about to venture out to sniff our gaiters. And there were torches and torches; and after they came swarming toward us through the woods, they gathered on our side. A few broke off and headed toward the right and the left flanks, but most of them came in our direction.

Which was all right and proper. And proper, too, when we could make out Langlois’s shape in the glow. It wasn’t warm, but even so he wasn’t wearing his buffalo jacket. That big shadow next to him must have been the legendary royal prosecutor. The torches lit up what looked like two bright-colored caps: a red one and a green one. We wondered, “Could they be soldiers?” Because now that the whole troop was coming quickly toward us, it wasn’t just two bright-colored caps but under them, two big, beautiful, very colorful bodies. Soldiers? That didn’t seem like Langlois. What would we need soldiers for? And it wasn’t that, not at all. Do you know what it was? The Captainess: Madame Tim in the red cap (a wide-brimmed velvet hat) was one. And the other, though we didn’t recognize her immediately, was the lady from the café in the green hood of one of Madame Tim’s beautiful coats.

Langlois, you see, put a lot of ceremony into everything, not only what I’m telling you about, but everything.

“Make a little room for me,” he said.

And you bet we did. And this is how, with one more soldier (and torches! and ladies!), we advanced toward the bottom of the Chalamont valley.

We’d slung our rifles over our shoulders. Now we took them in our hands. No more noisemakers. Only the noise those hundreds of footsteps made, step by step, moving forward and the fluttering of the flames that flapped above our heads like birds. And that was more than enough. The beast must already have banged his nose against the stone wall over there at the bottom of the valley, and he must already have turned back to break his nose against our wall of flames and men. He must have been spinning in front of us like a twig in a whirlpool. It wouldn’t have been particularly clever to blast the horn viciously in his ears to announce we were about to kill him. Time once again to say “solemnity and silence”!

The tracks, of course, were fresh, and tumultuous; there were as many as you could ask for. He was dancing an odd sarabande in front of us. Noiselessly. We were making noise with our footsteps and our torches; not much, but some. Not he.

“Halt!” Langlois said.

And he called for Curnier, who was a gardener for the Tims (and, come to think of it, we hadn’t seen Monsieur Tim, the so-called captain). We passed the name Curnier along the line of skirmishers at a whisper. And then, at a whisper, we got word he was coming. He came. He was holding a big dog on a leash.

Maybe you’re surprised that we didn’t bring along our dogs, and that I didn’t even mention if they were there or not. But you see our dogs are herding dogs or hunting dogs.

“And so?” you’ll say. “Weren’t you on a hunt?”

“No, sir! And to make you understand all that, you only have to look and listen. Look: at the bottom of the valley, not even counting the people who are sealing off the heights, there are more than thirty of us, all not saying a word; we only move once we’ve looked at Langlois and seen how he moves. If it hadn’t been for the rippling hum of the torches, you could have heard a pin drop. Langlois asked for Curnier in a whisper. And he was answered in a whisper that Curnier was on his way. Look: there is the Captainess. Naturally, the moment she accepted her rank she agreed to be there. But *how* is she there? In what way? We mentioned a fabulous outfit. Oh, yes! She was there as Woman. Do you think that we don’t see, beneath her heavy homespun coat, that she’s wearing a dress, not a uniform and boots? We noticed that, yes we did! And next to her, take a look! Who’s here? I told you: the lady from the Café de la Route who had borrowed a coat. But what’s that peeking out from under that coat? Isn’t it the dress we saw on her this morning? Don’t you think that this was the first time, ever, that the Chalamont valley bottom had seen women in fancy dress? And if we tell you that an ordinary hunt can manage quite well without a legendary royal prosecutor, would you believe us? That’s why that morning we locked up our dogs. Our dogs and noisemakers were not at all suited to each other!

“And besides, you’ll see. Because Curnier has a dog, you’ll see what we’re going to do. And he’s a much bigger dog than ours. At least twice the size. He’s a dog trained for the purpose, a mastiff. He’s wearing

an enormous spiked collar to protect his throat. He has pectoral muscles like a miller's mule. He's got no ears. His head is as round as a gourd. He walks with measured steps, like the prosecutor. His entire spine is like the backbone of a fish. His tail is as stiff as a rod. He's superb!"

And that's how, once Curnier let him off his leash, he goes into the copse in front of us, showing neither fear nor joy.

We let him get a little ahead of us, then we start to walk, following as quietly as possible.

We get to the Chalamont valley bottom. Above the last copses, the torches give us a glimpse of the cliff so steep that the snow can only cling to it in garlands. We make absolutely no noise. Not a sound anywhere save for the torches; a sound of wings, like birds flying back and forth overhead: doves looking for a place to land; a whole flock of wood pigeons, emissaries of a Noah's Ark much more densely populated than the first, seeking some Ararat or other. Here, that's the only sound in the world.

The tracks, still so exquisitely fresh and clear that everyone can see them, don't hint at any fear. They are forthright and irrevocable. Perhaps our *Gentleman* is playing at outsmarting us. Everyone is playing the same game: even God. But this *Gentleman* has guts! What's he hoping for? That an exit will open in the wall? Just when and where he needs it? And, hey, do you think he just might be shrewder than we are? That just maybe *we* are the ones who've been taken for a ride in this whole thing, with our horns and our bells and whistles? And our furtive footsteps and (in our case, it can be said) our fear?

Or perhaps, by chance, the *Gentleman* is simply awaiting the death we're about to hand him on a silver platter? That, you have to admit, would be more than a door; it would be a big gate, a triumphal arch even! And that would explain why, according to the tracks we followed, instead of dodging left or right, he simply backed himself up against the wall.

Whatever the case, we move forward. And suddenly we're out of the trees. We're in the open, and it stretches before us all the way to the foot of the wall.

At first we don't see anything. Langlois takes three short steps and he's in front of us. His arms are outstretched in a cross, and he waves them slowly up and down, as if testing wings. He signals to us: Stop, hush!

We hear the trousers of the torchbearers crunching as they walk through the woods behind us. The light grows brighter. We hear a crinkling sound back there in the trees; it's Sausage's and the Captainess's thick wadding.

There he is, over there! We see him! He's exactly where I feared. Just where, since this morning, we've been determined to push him with our fanfares, telegraphs, and ceremonies.

Well, he's there. And he couldn't be calmer, even if he'd chosen the spot himself.

He's taken shelter at the very the base of the wall, lying there and watching us. The torches make him blink his eyes; and all he does is fold back his long ears two or three times.

Without Langlois, what a massacre! We might be shooting each other. Amidst all the shouts, shots, smoke, and screw-ups (we would have certainly rushed him with all our might) he might have been able to leap back into the green forests.

"Hold still!" said Langlois.

And he stood before us, arms stretched out as if he were floating.

Oh! Hold still! While the torch-doves begin to flutter to and fro again.

Langlois advances. We have no desire to follow him. Langlois advances one step at a time.

And amid this stillness that suddenly makes us sleepy, something sheds light on the significance of this brief moment during which Langlois advances slowly, step by step: it's the buoyancy with which the legendary royal prosecutor brings his belly through our ranks.

And then, in front of the wolf's crossed paws, we see Curnier's dog lying dead. The snow is full of blood.

So many things happened during the silence!

Langlois advances; the wolf stands up. They are face-to-face, five paces from each other. Hold still!

The wolf looks at the dog's blood on the snow. He seems as sleepy as we are.

Langlois shot him with both hands at once. Two shots to the stomach.

And so, all that to arrive once again at those two devilishly quick shots of a pistol after a short, silent, secret meeting between the giver and the receiver of sudden death!

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“No, no, don’t try to understand! Shut up, please!” cried Sausage one day.

It was long afterwards, very long afterwards, at least twenty years later.

She was no longer at the Café de la Route. The Négrels had taken over (and even increased its business). She was living in the Bongalove with Delphine. Dog and cat. People never knew how those two women hadn’t skinned each other alive, leaving behind only a fingernail-size piece of each other.

Delphine—but now I realize I’ve skipped over too many years. I have to tell you about Delphine, obviously. But Sausage, in ’67 or ’68, which is about the time when I come on the scene, wasn’t done with life and had no wish to be.

Sure, she didn’t have the same energy she’d had. It’s pretty unlikely she still had the strength to go all the way down to the Chalamont valley bottom. She was approaching her eightieth year but, believe you me, she was approaching it the way a cat approaches embers.

During those twenty years she’d endured so many mortifications, one after the other, she’d been beaten black-and-blue so many times, and had had to forge herself under the blows of hammers against anvils of so many kinds that she’d lost her stature or, more precisely, she had assumed a new stature better adapted to bitterness, fury, and fire.

For those who, after losing sight of her, saw her again, it was impossible to recognize Sausage in the blue larding needle she’d become, but those of us who had followed her step by step knew very well why she’d grown so thin; what she’d been sharpened by; she was a thousand times more recognizable than before. It even seemed to us that, at the time of the Café de la Route, we’d hardly known her at all. It’s now that it was worth the trouble, while she was creeping up on her eighty years as if they were something pleasant but could burn.

Not that she had anything to be afraid of. Delphine’s forty years, well, she knew how to handle them; even if they were of a vitality to make you forget how fresh Sausage was in Madame Tim’s time. She needed to watch herself, that one! I mean Delphine, because Madame Tim . . . It’s amazing what can happen in twenty years. Yes, Delphine needed to be on her best behavior. Some things were difficult to keep in check.

Do you know what Sausage was doing? At the time of the Café de la Route, she’d had a man’s face; now she had the face of a notary. And with this face that radiated like a sun with the knowledge of the law in all its secret workings, she was on the lookout for how the laws of the march of time worked on Delphine. Ten seconds couldn’t pass without reading the obligatory entry of the cost of those ten seconds and the legal and unavoidable ramifications of spending those ten seconds on the notary’s face. Delphine, rich in every way, especially with her sumptuous and milky forty years, more appetizing than willowy youth, was forced every second, simply by looking at the face of that certified accountant, to know the balance that remained in her account.

Time after time, we saw them going at each other tooth and nail. Everything’s gone now, but then, in that high expanse overlooking the misty web of the lower valleys, Langlois had reproduced the maze of hedges in Saint-Baudille, where for three days he had strolled contentedly.

We have a hillside that overlooks this maze and, in the fall, it’s a very good spot to soak up the sun.

At the time when those two women were endlessly settling scores, some of us liked to go smoke a pipe amid the arnica flowers on that hillside.

It wasn’t for the sun or for the beautiful view. It was because, in spite of everything that had happened, life went on there thanks to those two women; and, whatever that life was, we couldn’t detach ourselves from it. We had the impression that, perhaps one day, around the bend of five minutes, or from a burst of laughter, a teardrop, or anything at all, something would suddenly explain to us what had never been explained. We still had our eyes fixed on the spot where Langlois had been, which is why some of us would often go smoke our pipes on that hillside overlooking the hedge maze of the Bongalove.

Delphine was sitting just where there’s a bird’s-eye view of the road that climbs up here. We knew her attention was turned that way. If she was watching for the peddler’s red umbrella, we could see it just as well as she could. He was downhill, near Monétier. He’d cross the meadows, toward Moulin de Recourt. It would take him at least seven or eight days to get here.

Sausage was perfectly aware of everything that was going on. You don’t teach a grandmother how to suck eggs. As you can imagine, Sausage knew all the ins and outs of sending love notes on the sly. She could easily have stopped it had she wanted to. All she would have needed to do on the appointed day (and it was easy to predict the appointed day by the red umbrella that we could see below us, climbing its league a day) would be to go to meet that umbrella with five sous in her hand. For five sous, that picture peddler would have killed mother *and* father.

But Sausage didn't give a tinker's damn about a love note. Delphine had the right to forget everything: that was her business. But Sausage had the right to assess Delphine's capital. A cat has the right to look at a king!

The sessions between those two seated women that we arbitrated from above were fights to the death. Each time Delphine was armed to the teeth. Her lovely décolletage was like a basket full of fruit and she must have bathed it in milk before going out, unbelievable! (That décolletage always interests men; we wanted to soak it all in.) From her alluring flounces and all that, nothing was lacking: wasp waist and bustle, blush and powder. Perfume whose scent we could catch through the smell of our pipes (that tells you something).

As for Sausage, I'll tell you how she was armed. She'd sit on a rock and watch. The younger woman, seated in three-quarter profile on her bench, her back to Sausage, leaned over the misty depths where the red umbrella was moving (slowly). Sausage, imperturbable, would stare at the nape of Delphine's neck and the bow in her hair. You could see Delphine, who, without ceasing to be on the lookout, would run her hand once, twice, three times (and nervously) over her nape. In the end, she'd turn toward Sausage and ask, "What is it?"

"Nothing," Sausage would say.

That went on for hours: once, twice, three times. Delphine would dig around in the pocket under her skirts and pull out a mirror in which she would pout prettily, stretching her throat, turning her head, sticking a few locks of hair back under some combs, chewing on ribbons, touching her lips, eyes, and chin with her fingertips, smoothing the underside of the chin with her palm; finally she would bring the mirror close to her face to check around her eyes, in their corners, her forehead, which she also tried to smooth. Then she'd lean over once again to look for the red umbrella way down below that, in the meantime, had advanced. Now it was behind Recourt.

Sausage hadn't budged an inch, remaining in position and glaring at that nape.

"What is it?" Delphine would ask, swiveling in place.

"Nothing," Sausage would reply.

"What are you looking at?" Delphine would ask.

"You," Sausage would say. (Lest there would be any misunderstanding.)

We'd watch them go at it for an hour or two. The fruit basket and the civilities got knocked about a bit. And after having examined every inch of herself, Delphine would stuff her breasts back in her blouse at least twenty times. It was as if she were playing with puppies in a small basket: And I'll pat you, and pet you, and puff up the lace around you.

This was no way to vanquish Sausage.

But Delphine knew how to vanquish her. And in the end, every time, she did. If it took Delphine a while, it wasn't out of the kindness of her heart. What she needed was a double-edged sword.

Suddenly she'd stand up (but only when she'd lost all her self-confidence and all her confidence in ointments, powders, and perfumes) and shout, "Oh, *your* Langlois! . . ."

And before Delphine could disappear through the trees, Sausage would have just the time to answer, "He wasn't *my* Langlois!"

And next you could hear Sausage, all alone, repeating this sentence under her breath.

So we would leave our perch, because it was time. Don't think we'd play these little games above the maze in order to ogle Delphine's basket. There's no question we'd make the most of it as we went by, but it's not like us to fiddle in these matters. What was important, you see, was what all that was really about.

We saw them all extricate themselves: Langlois, the Tims, the others; we had seen Langlois die (well, if we hadn't exactly seen him, we'd heard him; if we hadn't seen what is called seeing, even though the glow was strong enough to light up the summit of Le Jocond, we had all heard) but what were they all extricating themselves from, with their faces glowing with that false joy we knew they'd put on for us?

This is when people began to take advantage of Sausage's despair or, more precisely, of her old age that had robbed her of the ability to hide her despair.

At first, she was suspicious. Then (she must have been tallying up her balance sheet as often as she did Delphine's) she must have said to herself, "What's the point, with the little time I have left to live?"

So we would leave our perch, glide behind the hedge, and call to her. At first, she answered without moving from her spot. Then, she came up to the barrier. Finally, she crossed the hedge so that in the end we brought along an extra cane, which we would give to her when she met up with us.

And so five or six of us would accompany her; we would climb very slowly just above the coaching inn, to a meadow under the apple trees. One or the other of us was always responsible for keeping an eye on the cows. But that didn't interfere with anything; on the contrary, it gave us time to think about what

she was saying; for we didn't have to do much to get her started, but from time to time we needed time to understand what she was saying. Only after careful consideration would we speak of our feelings about Langlois.

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"Be quiet already," shouted Sausage (I say "shouted" because, when strained, her gravelly voice turned shrill and harsh), "he was a man like all the others!"

Well, there was no lack of men like all the others. Weren't we all men like all the others, in the end? If that's all she wanted to say, go on and say it! Hadn't we already heard Langlois say that Monsieur V. was a man like all the others?

But what we could never get her to understand was that we also loved Langlois. We didn't hold it against her; on the contrary. If we were there to make her talk, it's because we were still fond of the man. We didn't hold him responsible for anything, not even death. He'd always seemed to have such knowledge of things.

You have to admit, there were mysteries!

Let's agree that he didn't have to explain anything to anyone about the way in which he rid us (rid the world) of Monsieur V.

Still! Aren't there courts and an executioner in Paris?

But they might have said that it was none of our business; if it was anyone's business, it was the legendary royal prosecutor's! And hadn't we seen that the royal prosecutor and Langlois were as thick as thieves? Did it ever cross our minds that the legendary royal prosecutor had reason to reproach Langlois? On the contrary, one could even say he treated him like his little pet. And the evening of the famous wolf hunt, when Langlois fired his two pistols (as usual, we have to say devilishly fast; well aimed, but devilishly fast), didn't that royal prosecutor, notwithstanding his belly, rush to where Langlois was with aeronautic buoyancy?

As if he were trying to protect him (from what?). And more than protect him: to be with him.

And because we are talking about that royal prosecutor, wasn't he—yes or no—wasn't he renowned for his "deep knowledge of human things" and for being a "lover of souls"?

And that evening, when the wolf fell, wasn't there an exchange of glances between the prosecutor and Langlois?

And I, who was in a good position to see the gaze of that man with his *deep knowledge of human things*, didn't I clearly see an immeasurable sadness in that gaze (as it responded to Langlois's)?

Easy to say. "Shut up!" We would have wanted to shut up then, really. That's all we were asking.

It's just like with Madame Tim; the friendship between her and Langlois was friendship and nothing more. We knew it perfectly well, even if that friendship, you have to admit, was awfully demanding! The friendship that had begun between those two beings, one of whom was made of convent, volcano, and ice, all in bluish marble, while who knew what the other was made of; the friendship that had begun between those two beings the day after the wolf hunt: explain that! In all its brutality! Because you could say that it exploded.

Not a day went by when Madame Tim didn't come to the village. And then, she and Langlois would stroll tirelessly up and down the square with its linden trees, speaking very little, hardly looking at each other, strolling silently side by side for long stretches of time. Or else it was Langlois who would go to Saint-Baudille.

"And what about you? After that, how many times did you wear your beautiful dress, either to go to Saint-Baudille to meet him (to meet them) or to play the third, silent wheel in the stroll beneath the lindens?"

"Don't make a mountain out of a molehill," Sausage said. "What was so extraordinary if Langlois liked to discuss the ways of the world? We did it long before those strolls beneath the lindens. This was merely a continuation. We started to talk about those ways the first night he arrived. He hadn't even taken his pipe out of his haversack. I've lived. I've taken some hard knocks. I know that everything would be smooth sailing if there were such a thing as smooth sailing. But where things should be smooth they are rough. He liked to talk to people who weren't wet behind the ears. And Madame Tim wasn't wet behind the ears. And what's so extraordinary about my cleaning myself up to be with those people? Wasn't he clean? And Madame Tim too? Would you have wanted me to look like a barmaid?

"The morning of the wolf hunt I can still see the lot of you. Your eyes wide as saucers. What a laugh! Don't make a mountain out of a molehill.

"He said to me, 'If you can gussy yourself up a bit, I'll invite you to come along.'

"I gussied myself up. The sleigh? Madame Tim would have sent it to Tom, Dick, or Harry if Langlois

had said, ‘Send it to Tom, Dick, or Harry.’

“Yes, it’s true, I often went to Saint-Baudille to meet them. And they probably didn’t even walk twice on the square under the lindens without me; that’s true too. You know that when you start talking about the ways of the world, it never stops.”

“But why all of a sudden after the wolf hunt?”

“Ah, well, you must have realized that it was something extraordinary. Madame Tim and I were both shaken by it. Friendships are often born out of something like that. Maybe you were surprised that, when you saw me in Chalamont, I was wearing a quilted coat that Madame Tim had lent me. Is that it? That’s not much. You’ve seen me serve you drinks, raise a glass from time to time, and make up a fourth when necessary. But that wasn’t how I was useful to Madame Tim. When it comes to the ways of the world, lots of things don’t happen automatically: everything, you could say. It would be nice to know why. I was completely incapable of saying why but I was very capable of saying what I’d notice when certain things don’t work for me. You don’t learn everything in a convent, even if there are volcanoes at the door. I never saw a volcano at my door but I know perfectly well what a Sunday afternoon in a barracks town is like. Madame Tim thought that my viewpoint shed some light on things. And exchanging viewpoints can take you quite far. I’m speaking about women. It can even lead to the loaning of a quilted coat. And why were we in Chalamont, you want to ask? And not in Saint-Baudille, all warm and cozy in the sitting room sipping cherry brandy? Simply because we wanted to know the ways of the world down at the bottom of the Chalamont valley. You’re not going to say that Chalamont isn’t part of the world, are you? So we’ve got every right. If we take an interest.”

“What about the prosecutor?”

“Him, too,” she said. “He was also curious about the ways of the world at the bottom of the Chalamont valley. The souls you meet, even in convents, sitting rooms, barracks towns, and families, don’t teach you much if you haven’t met the souls at the bottom of the Chalamont valley.”

We said, “Okay. We get it. But now you have to explain something to us. How is it that Langlois lost his good humor?” Sausage recalled perfectly the day we’d seen him for the first time. True, the circumstances that night were exceptional and we greeted him like the Messiah. Had we been mistaken, or had he really been the bon vivant we took him for at first? And when he came back to the village wearing his opera hat, the least we can say is that he caused sadness around him.

“He was a good fellow,” she said. “He didn’t cause sadness at all. The first time he came here, you’d have had to have been in a real muddle to think he could be summed up by a clay pipe and boots. Besides, you saw it for yourselves. With a service record like his, you don’t spend much time laughing. He’d been in Algeria. He was in Oran with Desmichels and at the Battle of Macta with Trézel and he said it was no picnic getting smacked around by Algerian artillerymen disguised as women. The guys who were there and got out alive had to have real guts. First off. Then they realized that it was good enough simply to be alive without having to pretend to be bons vivants. And later, they realized not everything could be made right with a bowl of soup. (And I can tell you, I didn’t need General Bugeaud to teach me that. True, I worked without all the fanfare. And got the job done.) So: he weighed the pros and cons. The pipe and boots were mere ornamentation. What wasn’t ornamentation was when he set up his sentries, locked you in your houses, organized the patrols, and came back to my place saying, ‘Sit down. We’re going to talk about the ways of the world.

“ ‘For,’ he said, ‘nothing happens because of the Holy Spirit. If people disappear, it’s because someone is making them disappear. And if someone is making them disappear, it’s for a reason. For us, there seems to be no reason, but for him there’s a reason. And if there’s a reason for him, we have to be able to understand it. Personally I don’t think one man can be different from other men to the point of having totally incomprehensible reasons. There are no strangers. There are no strangers. Do you get that, old girl?’

“Of course I got it! I earned my living lying on my back, faceup. If there had been strangers, and if anyone had had the chance to meet them, it would’ve been me.

“ ‘That’s why I’m asking you, old girl,’ Langlois would say.

“There were times when he was as sentimental *as Job*.

“I didn’t really like being reminded of my own service record; when I was face-to-face with him, I wanted to swear with all my might. That’s why I once answered, ‘You say that nothing happens through the work of the Holy Spirit, but I say maybe everything happens precisely through the work of the Holy Spirit.’

“I said that off the top of my head, to get rid of a thousand other images in my mind, but he was amazed. I wonder why!

“ ‘Perhaps,’ he said. ‘And that would not be so jolly.’

“And after a moment, he added: ‘And if everything or nothing comes down to the same thing, as you say, well, that’s even less jolly.’

“I wasn’t a bit surprised to see him come back with that opera hat of his that scared everyone off.

“There are so many things you lot don’t know. The wolf hunt, fine. It was lovely to see but great battles are not fought in the theaters of war.

“He’d already found himself at the bottom of the Chalamont valley with his gendarmes and Frédéric II. He’d been forced to improvise his little tune. And, if you ask me, it wasn’t so bad for someone who had only the experience of his service record to rely on. It wasn’t with a few words off the top of my head that I could help him very much.

“To live the life I’ve lived, you have to come to terms with certain things. To live any life at all, you have to come to terms with certain things. Madame Tim and the prosecutor and I talked a lot about service records, and Madame Tim and the prosecutor came to terms with certain things in their respective ways. But on the evening of the wolf hunt I saw that Langlois was not coming to terms with certain things when he was reduced to improvising again, firing his two pistols—bang!—at the same time.

“That was no solution, and he was aware of that.

“Five months later, one evening he said to me, ‘Be ready tomorrow.’ That’s the day you saw us leave in the buggy, Madame Tim, him, and me, like I said. He’d warned me the evening before.

“It was spring. It was raining. He was driving with Madame Tim next to him and me next to Madame Tim. All three of us on the same seat, facing the road. We’d pulled up the top and buckled the leather apron across our legs. I didn’t know where he was taking us. I thought Madame Tim knew. But after we passed Clelles, when we went down the first side road to the left toward the woods, she shot me a questioning glance. I signaled in a way to make her understand that I didn’t know what was going on either.

“We traveled two leagues through trees that scraped the top of the buggy, through ruts that tossed us against one another. We came out on a forest road. We turned toward Menet. I understood we’d taken the side road in order to avoid Chichiliane.

“And we kept climbing. At a walk. I have to say that, beneath the gentle rain, all of us huddled together, with the wafting of crisp scents and especially not a single word, it was exquisite.

“We came to the pass. We continued on the way to Diois. It had stopped raining. The clouds were like chopped hay. I said to myself, ‘It’s not the same anymore.’ And indeed, it wasn’t. We were going downhill. After an hour the mountains resumed their places in the air, and we threaded our way below them until we got to the village.

“He stops in front of the inn. Madame Tim and I would rather have died than utter a single word. We looked at each other with a wink and then we looked at him. We took hold of our little handbags at the same time, while he unbuckled the apron. And we stepped down to the ground.

“He was a fine-looking man, you know! Perhaps not the kind to appeal to young girls but the kind women think about. He wasn’t one to bow and scrape. The hand he held out was firm. And I liked the fact that he had more on his mind than just me—you could tell that from his eyes—but that in spite of everything, he was willing to give us his arm and shoulder to help us down from the carriage, which made that arm and that shoulder priceless. Madame Tim was of the same opinion.

“Strike me dead if that day it wasn’t me who thought first, ‘What a shame!’ But why? I didn’t know. I only knew it was a shame.

“And I’m sure I thought it first because, right as I was thinking it, Madame Tim asked if we were going to eat, so obviously she hadn’t thought it. Hers were the first words any of us had uttered since we’d left in the morning.

“I’m sure Madame Tim had to force herself to get them out and must have said to herself, ‘I’ll be the daring one.’

“I said nothing. I just thought, ‘What a shame!’

“Most of the time Madame Tim and I walked side by side, but on a few occasions, and on this one in particular, I went in front; I moved out of the rank and file, see?

“While we were eating I saw, for the first and last time in my life, Langlois with a needy look on his face. And do you know why? To ask us this idiotic thing: ‘Would you by any chance have any use for a good embroiderer?’ (And he continued, dumb as an ox) ‘She can make lace, too. In this village, there’s a woman, very good . . .’

“Poor Langlois! And Madame Tim and me! Who knew exactly how we were supposed to react! And we both immediately answered in the same thrilled, astonished voice, ‘Of course!’ You’d think that until now, without an embroiderer, our lives had been a circus sideshow.

“And I looked at Madame Tim. As innocent as a girl making her First Communion. I must have looked the same. Even more so, perhaps.

“That’s my Langlois! (He wasn’t my Langlois, it’s that cow Delphine who says that. He was never my Langlois. I was born twenty years too soon. If I had been born twenty years later, he would still be alive.) So there’s our Langlois, reassured and even a smooth talker (and I said to myself, ‘Go ahead, you’ll never try harder than me’), explaining to us: there was an embroiderer, a lacemaker, a fairy—that’s the word he used. He watched the effect he was having on us. Poor Langlois! Madame Tim and me! You can imagine that he had the effect of water on flowers. He must have mulled that word over and over. And where did he get it in the first place? This fairy was raising her little boy and had been recommended by the parish council even more for her exemplary behavior than for her manual dexterity.

“I’ve never been recommended by any parish council; true, I haven’t raised a little boy and my behavior has been far from exemplary but, all while soaking up my braised beef gravy with my bread, I found the right words and uttered them as naturally as possible so that Langlois wouldn’t get tangled up in more words that had nothing to do with us and so that he’d understand we were his friends there as much as when we were home. And that the fairies could go to hell! Don’t you agree? With friends you shouldn’t have to beat around the bush.

“Madame Tim gently stroked my gloved hand. I hadn’t raised my voice. I’d said what I had to say. He was getting on my nerves with his needy-looking face. It wasn’t a look for him. If we’d hitched the horses to the buggy, if Madame Tim had come to us on her own—and she was afraid of the Saint-Baudille horses—and if the three of us had come all that way through rain, over peaks, and through valleys, it wasn’t to see him acting timid. All he had to do was tell us frankly what he wanted, as usual. That’s how we liked him.

“And he told us. I don’t think anyone could ever challenge Langlois. Besides, he made us—especially me—understand straight out that it wasn’t to spare us that he’d stood on ceremony. It was because right until then he himself had been hesitating. Now he wasn’t—and so he told us what it was all about.

“A woman had settled in this village, for reasons he thought pointless to tell us. Suffice it to say that she wasn’t from there; she’d been forced to come and we didn’t need to know why. Not that he had any doubts at all about us but, on the contrary, this way we’d have the freedom of mind to do what he wanted us to do.

“He wanted to enter this woman’s home but to enter it as if he were, so to speak, invisible. Otherwise he wouldn’t have needed us. It would have been enough (he said) to knock on her door, say ‘Good day, madame,’ and ask her any old thing, after which he would have gone into the house and, if that had been all he’d wanted, well, that would have been that.

“But it wasn’t about that.

“He wanted to go in—he thought it would be enough for him to enter the room where she ordinarily received people. He didn’t think he needed to see the other rooms, the bedrooms or anything else. He just wanted to enter this woman’s house and be allowed to stay there, seated, ignored or forgotten as much as possible.

“He simply wanted to get a feel for the house, that is, to have some time to look around. Understand the house from the inside. He’d looked for a way to do it; he’d schemed; he’d been thinking about it for a long time; and this is what he came up with.

“This woman really was skillful. She earned her living and her son’s (well, at least since she’d settled in that village) by embroidering and tatting. The Minimes convent, and the ladies and gentleman in general, found her work making bridal trousseaus. So this was an introduction.

“He wanted the three of us—Madame Tim, him, and me—to knock on the woman’s door. We were supposed to be: Madame Tim, a lady with a daughter who was to be married; Langlois, for example, a friend of the family whom we would introduce briskly, though not as someone of much importance; I would be, let’s say, a friend as well, or an aunt, if Madame Tim agreed. We’d make him sit down somewhere and say to him, ‘Be patient; we’re going to talk about things of no interest to men’; and then Madame Tim and I would examine this woman’s handiwork and place an order. A real order; that is to say, it was very important that this woman not suspect any kind of trick in any way (‘It’s a serious question of compassion I care very much about,’ said Langlois, adding: ‘If I thought that one day she might come to suspect anything at all about our visit, I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night. I’d constantly be imagining this distraught woman fleeing across the world, when all I want is what’s best for her’), so it was very important that we place an actual order with her, which we would pick up in due time (which would, in addition, afford him the possibility of a second visit in case he found it necessary), real work for which we would pay.

“It was up to Madame Tim and me, he said, to know if we really needed lace and embroidered things.

“ ‘One can always use lace and embroidered things,’ said Madame Tim.

“ ‘But up to the point of being able to stay, let’s say, a good hour at this woman’s?’

“ ‘To the point of staying a week,’ said Madame Tim.

“She took the words right out of my mouth; and she realized it because she continued gently to stroke my gloved hand.

“So, it was perfect. And I came to this conclusion: ‘With us, how couldn’t it be perfect?’ I asked. Langlois looked at me gratefully.

“The woman lived in the old part of the village. Below, near the inn, there were chic houses. The back alley we were going down wasn’t all that appealing, I have to say. Two ocher quarrymen lived there and the red dust they dragged in on the soles of their shoes bloodied the water that seeped from their sinks.

“(These villages on the Diois slope are nothing like our villages. It’s like night and day. In our villages everything is made for the cows and the sawmill. Here, everything was for nobility and history. By history I mean the history of France, of course, but also, other people’s history: sticking your nose in what’s none of your business. There’s almost always an old castle in these villages with the houses squeezed up against it, even when it’s in ruins.)

“I said to myself, ‘Not even a halfway respectable woman could live in a place like this.’ The houses were in blackish shreds and through the little lanes we were climbing up a kind of hill where, in the gaps between the collapsing houses, we could see the ruins of something that must have once been quite grand.

“As we climbed, the place became, if not exactly respectable, a little bit friendlier. There was grass and, through the crumbling rubble of the houses, you could see a lovely little valley with a stream, alder trees, a road lined with poplars, a small marsh, brown reeds, a windmill, willows, a tiny white farmhouse, plane trees, and what was probably a mulberry tree. And the little valley stretched like that southward, with everything I just mentioned, and little by little all of that shrank in the distance, merging with the grass in a sort of omelet-with-herbs color.

“Fifty steps up, facing this soothing view, was a house, intact, well preserved, and very clean. Its ground-floor windows were protected by strong, beautiful wrought-iron grilles with the kind of curves I like.

“I’ve always wanted window grilles like those. I’ve always dreamed of living in a house with windows protected by curved grilles. Who knows why. No doubt for the same reasons as that woman. Because she was the one who lived there. It’s the idea of a woman who lives alone; the idea of a woman with responsibilities, for a little boy, for example, or for herself; sometimes that’s enough of a responsibility.

“Naturally I was prepared to find the fairy abominable. Some pale little church mouse. But no. She was a woman of a certain age, entirely gray except for her clothing, which was black, and her eyes, which were the bluest blue. But even though they were blue, they didn’t give that impression of youth that blue eyes can give to old faces, or wrinkled faces, or tired faces. What did her face look like? I think I can say that it looked worried, with a worry that exhausts you, that wears you out and ages you, if you know what I mean.

“We knocked, she opened her door, and at first she saw only Madame Tim and me; very nicely she asked us to come in. Then Langlois, who’d been standing off to the side, showed himself and the woman wavered, it seemed, and stopped in the doorway, but finally she stepped aside and invited all three of us to proceed through the open door in the hallway.

“Madame Tim had taken the initiative and was already saying a few words about our business as we went down the hall. The woman led us into a room that seemed both dark and immense. The window—one of those with a curved grille—could hardly illuminate the whole of it.

“All we could see was this window filled with the little valley I mentioned. The woman apologized for the lack of light and steered us toward that window where the sky that looked like chopped hay was laughing.

“The window lit a few square meters in which we could make out a beautiful armchair, newly upholstered; an amazing game table lavishly inlaid with ivory and ebony; a chair with legs as polished as violin scrolls; and, in the middle of the lit space, a ‘worktable’ laden with canvases in progress on which rested a pair of eyeglasses with thick lenses and steel frames.

“I could hear Madame Tim speaking. I couldn’t possibly repeat what she said. I was wondering what Langlois expected to find there. And I was looking around, trying not to be indiscreet. Curiosity was making my head spin a little.

“I imagine it was making Madame Tim’s head spin as well; she didn’t stop talking for a second, like a drunk who wants get up and go and won’t stop walking for fear of falling and even sometimes starts to run. And that’s when he falls; and, all the while my head was spinning, I was terrified that Madame Tim

would fall; and I said to myself, ‘She’s talking too fast and saying too much.’

“Langlois must have shared my opinion, because he coughed.

“The woman must also have been of the same opinion. She kept looking from Madame Tim to me, from me to Langlois, from Langlois to Madame Tim.

“At last I heard Madame Tim’s voice a little less. ‘That’s it,’ I said to myself, ‘we’ve blown it.’ I stubbornly fixed my eyes on a darkened corner. I didn’t want to face that blue gaze when it understood that those curved grilles didn’t protect a thing.

“And I heard the woman’s voice calmly answering the detailed questions that Madame Tim continued to ask.

“And I realized that Madame Tim had pulled off the tour de force of perfectly imitating a grand bourgeois lady from a small town or even a little village. The woman was reassured. She was talking about the excellent quality of her thread. She put on her glasses and, in the light from the window, she demonstrated to Madame Tim that her thread was practically indestructible. We were saved.

“I looked at Langlois: he was as white as a sheet.

“It was Madame Tim who said to us very drily, ‘Why don’t the two of you just sit down.’

“Just how a big bourgeois moneybags would have said it, just as if she was at home wherever she went and most of all in the home of the linen maid she was thinking of hiring.

“Oh, Madame Tim was stunningly beautiful!

“What else could that little gray woman do except painstakingly demonstrate that her silks were of the finest quality and that her needlework was free of even the slightest mistake? And she did it like a determined little ant, asking Madame Tim to be so kind as to go with her right up to the window to examine her stitch work in the light. Which Madame Tim did, all the while producing rather grotesque little growls, grotesque, that is, to anyone who knew her soul was filled with ponds and verbena, and her head with wild birds.

“ ‘May I, my dear?’ said Madame Tim, seating herself by the work-table, without a ‘pretty please.’ Her position as a bourgeois was all the permission she needed.

“ ‘Come look at this, will you?’ she then said to me.

“Later she admitted she hadn’t needed me at all—she was perfectly capable of keeping up the act, which, by that time, was no longer an act. She’d seen this woman’s work and it was absolutely remarkable. She’d also seen that her embroiderer’s fingers had been eaten away as if by acid and that, through the lenses of her eyeglasses, her blue eyes were rimmed with red.

“ ‘And,’ she added, ‘I’m not sentimental, not like some grisette in any case; my *sentiments*, even if they can be haughty, have a rather wild cast to them; I could have seen worn fingers and red eyes and still remained perfectly indifferent. I know how easy it is to have worn fingers and red eyes and still not be worth a cent. And sometimes it’s because you aren’t worth a cent that you have worn fingers and red eyes. But in this woman what I saw was the panting of a hunted doe who became calmer and calmer as I spoke, as I took an interest in her work and gradually persuaded her that I really was there to order some needlework from her.’

“ ‘I confess,’ Madame Tim went on, ‘that I could easily sacrifice my life to comfort a doe or a leopard. I like comforting others. So it wasn’t an act anymore. I was reassuring the doe quite openly and I put my whole heart into it. In fact, that’s why I pulled it off so well. No, I called you over to me because at bottom you had no more right than I to find out what Langlois had come there to do. As soon as you didn’t have that woman to bother with, you could bother with Langlois. In fact, you didn’t deprive yourself of that opportunity; I could see you out of the corner of my eye. And if you did discover something, you wouldn’t have told me.’

“Well, that was true. But she was mistaken. I *was* watching Langlois and my eyes were open wide on that big shadowy room whose depths hid vague shapes and glimmers of gold, but I was thinking of something else entirely.

“Do you know what? I was jealous! Oh! That often happens to me. Jealous of Madame Tim, who was making herself so useful, doing Langlois such a great favor. I wanted it to be me, or at least to have a part in the thing. So, on the contrary, when she said, ‘Come look at this, will you?’ I was happy to go over to her.

“Langlois, who’d been so pale, had turned his head away ever so slightly to conceal his face in shadow and hide his satisfaction. He couldn’t hide anything from me. I could still see the corner of his mouth and the crow’s-feet around his left eye. That was enough for me. I was sentimental as well. That’s what made me jealous. He found an armchair and sat down.

“My role was simple. I’m not stupid either. All I had to do was to agree with Madame Tim, even overdo it a little bit every now and again. Then, in a roundabout way (as if I knew I didn’t have the

standing to disagree straight-out with Madame Tim), but so cleverly roundabout that the embroiderer could realize what I was up to (as if, subordinate though I was, I still had enough taste not to be able to restrain my admiration for such beautiful work) (which is always true of subordinate positions—poor cousins, disinherited youngest daughters), I would gently strengthen the woman's case. You can see I also knew what was what. I handled it very well. I told you: It was easy.

"So easy it was automatic. Meanwhile, I could keep an eye on Langlois and on the large room now emerging from the shadows.

"At first I saw nothing but the gilding.

"Golden threads and golden leaves—here the glinting curve of a piece of furniture, there some reeds on huge portrait frames, till finally I could make out the room's three missing walls. Across from the window, at least twenty steps away (later we learned that this house had been the former guesthouse of the old convent whose ruins overlooked the hillside), I could now discern a very big bergère armchair with a large cloverleaf back. Next to it was a potbellied hope chest and when, some time later, the evening sun shone through the chopped-hay sky, its legs with feet like lion paws and the huge carved leaves on its side began to appear. Above it hung an oval portrait and inside the gleaming frame, supple as wickerwork, was the pink, pale green, and blue shape of a young woman. Perpendicular to the wall with the window and door through which we'd entered stood a tall peasant wardrobe, not set out in plain sight as is customary but crammed into a corner so as to squeeze in a buffet and a credenza next to it, like at an auction. The whole room resembled a furniture warehouse.

"In addition to the table next to us, piled with unfinished canvases, and the lavish, inlaid game table, the upholstered armchair, that other chair polished like a musical instrument, there was, in the order they disappeared into the shadows: a heavy round sculpted table, a piano stool, a slipper chair, a small low settee, a chaise longue, and a few objects drowned in darkness, too far from the window for me to identify.

"I could only glance furtively around me, so it took more than an hour to inventory everything I've told you about in five minutes; only gradually did I realize that an entire household's worth of furniture was piled up in there.

"It felt like the Exodus or an anthill. Add to that the gray woman's anxiety and the curved grilles on the windows: all this was no doubt what was left of a fortune; it had been carried off and packed in there.

"Almost entirely in shadow, amid the indistinguishable objects, I could see Langlois's shoulder. He was sitting deep in a wing chair. And if not for the light-colored cloth of his frock coat, I wouldn't even have recognized his shoulder.

"Under the pretext of examining an apron made of satin *bouillonné* and decorated with lace flounces that, according to the gray woman, was meant to go with a plum-colored cashmere *toilette de visite*, I shifted my position to get a better glimpse of Langlois.

"He was sitting as deep down as possible in the armchair. I could see the very glossy black hair of one temple, darker than the shadows.

"Motionless, he faced the darkest part of the room.

"I moved the apron in front of me so that, while I continued to express my deep admiration for it, I could see the skin on Langlois's temple was smooth, without a wrinkle: he was thinking.

"But I couldn't yet tell what he was looking at.

"Madame Tim and I were discussing a quilted child's cloak, with braiding and frogging, trimmed with crimped feathers. This was all the rage at the time. The gray woman was trembling with apprehension and desire. Such work had never been undertaken by a country seamstress before, but Madame Tim was sure the gray woman could pull it off. Madame Tim was ready to pay for the materials and accept all the risk. And the hands of the gray woman trembled because it was a very grand order.

"Langlois was looking at a portrait hanging on the darkest wall.

"I say a portrait because of the shape of the gold frame, a narrow rectangle, upright like a man. Man or woman, there in the shadow was a full-length, almost life-size portrait of someone standing. The light from the window reflected by the polished wood of the big round table cast a few glimmers but I was too far away and too dazzled by the whiteness of the cloth we were examining to make out anything more than some blurry shapes that must have been hands. That bituminous body, I finally decided, was a man's.

"From where Langlois was, and especially from the care he'd taken to shelter himself in the wings of the chair, his eyes must have become sufficiently accustomed to the dark to make out how those hands fit into that body, how that body stood, and perhaps he could even make out the face that body was carrying up there where I couldn't see a thing, and where instinct was telling me not to look.

“An agreement was reached on the child’s cloak.

“Madame Tim remained a short time, maybe two seconds, as if suspended in the air in silence. For well over an hour she’d been exhausting herself.

“I understood how kind Langlois had been in *beating around the bush*. That man knew all the secrets of friendship. And how much more tiredness, remorse, and fear Madame Tim and I would have avoided had we agreed to be perfectly innocent and order so much finery with no questions asked.

“Again what I’m telling you lasted only a short time—the time of Madame Tim’s tired silence. No longer than a blink of an eye; but the silence struck the three of us like a bolt of lightning. The gray woman registered it a mere instant after we did: the time of the blink of an eye and she was so happy, she was smiling at an angel.

“ ‘And about the pillowcase?’ Madame Tim asked with difficulty.

“She was at the end of her rope. She looked at me desperately.

“But as her poor cousin, there was only so much I could do. What right did I have to put my two cents in?

“And in fact it was too late. The gray woman answered politely about the pillowcase and searched her worktable, but without enthusiasm. Besides, as far as the pillowcase was concerned, there was no need for endless discussion.

“I looked over at Langlois.

“This is when he should have given us a sign of life. Now Madame Tim had to use the last of her strength to wrap things up. And then it was time for us to leave.

“We were completely drained and it would be a lie to say that in the end we felt no pity for that gray woman.

“Even the bourgeois that Madame Tim was playing had to pity her. If she wanted to be true to her role, it was time to get up and go.

“Something brushed the window. It was a little boy pressing his face against the windowpane. His eyes were blue like the woman’s.

“I surmised that every evening when he got out of school, he must have done the same thing, pressing his nose against the window to see who was in the house before coming in. Because of the shadows and the backlighting, he didn’t notice us right away. His child’s mouth still had a placid, greedy look about it. But as soon as he saw us, he drew back in a hurry, like a small animal wondering where to run and hide.

“Madame Tim lost her nerve and started rummaging through her handbag. ‘The pillowcase, the flounces, the handkerchiefs, the child’s cloak.’ Words that she realized had lost all meaning. But she couldn’t come up with any others.

“ ‘What fools we are!’ I thought.

“I could see what she was about to do. In her shoes I would have done the same thing. Exactly what shouldn’t be done. And that’s what she did.

“She took three louis from her change purse.

“ ‘Here,’ she said thoughtlessly.

“ ‘No, madame,’ the woman answered.

“And she stepped back, her hands tightening into fists.

“ ‘Yes, take it,’ said Madame Tim, and she brought the louis closer to the tight fists.

“ ‘Take it, take it,’ said Madame Tim, foolishly trying to shove the louis into the tight fists.

“I heard the woman violently push away a chair.

“ ‘Where is the gentleman who was with you?’ she asked.

“This time, there was just the perfect little silence.

“ ‘I’m here,’ said Langlois, emerging from his armchair. ‘I was sleeping. Have you finished your purchases, dear friend?’

“He stood up. His eyes were in fact puffy like the eyes of someone who just woke up and his cheeks were marked with little red stripes from the fabric of the chair. You didn’t stand a chance against Langlois.

“ ‘Forgive me, madame,’ said the gray woman (she was smiling). ‘I don’t know what happened, I’m tired. I’ve stayed awake for three nights over Mademoiselle Michard’s trousseau. I am happy to do it, that’s not what I mean, but there comes a time when one can no longer control one’s nerves.’ (She was speaking in a tone of calm exaltation like someone who has just escaped a grave danger.)

“She continued to smile as she looked at Madame Tim and then at Langlois (she had never been worried about me), and Langlois looked even more ridiculous than we did, with his striped cheeks, his puffy eyes, his stupid mouth the corners of which were still greasy with the saliva of sleep (but *I* knew he was putting it on).

“ ‘Is that your little boy?’ asked Madame Tim.

“ ‘Yes,’ said the woman. ‘He’s just getting back from school. He’s shy. We live alone.’

“I said to myself, ‘As long as Madame Tim . . .’

“And I was thinking, thinking, especially about that portrait of a man that Langlois had stared at until his eyes had grown swollen and the fabric had left stripes on his cheeks.

“But Madame Tim pulled herself together. She didn’t ask what I’d been dying to ask ever since I’d seen those eyes and cheeks (and what Madame Tim must have been dying to ask, too). ‘You’re a widow, aren’t you?’ No. Madame Tim simply dropped the act that had been weighing on her so (as she could now without taking any risks). With her natural kindness, she managed to have the three louis accepted as an advance.”

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“You,” Sausage continued, “you are the cream of sapheads and the flower of fatheads, with your empty noggins shaped like big bowls, spittoons, and chamber pots. I’m talking to you.”

We were still sitting next to her, on the gravel in the maze of the Bongalove. The low walls of green bushes prevented our being seen from where Delphine was, as usual, lighting the lamps well before nightfall.

Sausage was talking to us, but this wasn’t the first time she’d bawled us out. We were used to it. We expected it. And this time she didn’t even make it all the way to that famous line of hers, the one where she wound up losing her breath (and we had to pat her on the back to set her breathing again), the one where she said we’d all been forged from the rotted ruins of men, women, children, worlds, and gods.

At first these words had made a big impression on us because of what she said about women and children. We all had women and children. And it was not pleasant hearing what she had to say about them, what they were made of, where they came from, and where they were going, and in nasty ways at that. As if we spent our lives—men, women, and children—camped out in the bowels of some colossal beast. But when she started to choke on the pile of filth she was spouting, well, we patted her gently on the back.

She had the old mouth of her eighty years, smashed into her yellowing bones for all those years by the blows of a hammer that only recently had succeeded in knocking it in completely. Her black lips were emaciated and the big, stiff, white hairs of her stubbly mustache quivered above them. Those hairs were as sharp as a pike’s teeth.

“And after that trip we took, you all were like cheese from a cow’s ass.” (It was a shame to hear an old person speak in such a vile way.) “On the way back, even though it was night, he made us take the path through the woods, so as to avoid Chichiliane.

“Didn’t you notice that the royal prosecutor came around more than usual at that time? Didn’t you notice that somewhere between the little square with the linden trees and my door Madame Tim had set up headquarters? Back and forth she paced (maybe you thought it was because you were all so handsome?) and then, whenever she was exhausted, I’d say to her, ‘Come in.’

“She’d say, ‘No.’

“And I’d say, ‘I’ll bring you out a chair.’

“And she’d answer, ‘No.’

“And I’d say, ‘What are you afraid of?’ Because she still had her terraces over in Saint-Baudille, her rose gardens, her grandchildren. None of that had been swallowed up by some natural disaster, I imagine!”

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Sausage made us feel lower than low. I won’t repeat the words that came out of her mouth about us; it’s not that they sully us but that we don’t really like speaking that way, in cold blood. In a fit of anger, yes; but never the way she did. She said all that to us calmly. She chewed us to bits between her little black lips and her pointy pike mustache.

“I see the prosecutor coming,” she said. “A week goes by; you’re all making hay. I see Madame Tim arrive. She doesn’t come in. She looks through my window to see if I’m there. I wave her in; she waves back ‘no.’ She goes away; I watch where she’s going. She walks down your streets as if she were strolling down a city boulevard, sticking her parasol in your streams of liquid manure, raising her skirts above your streams of liquid manure; carefully placing her little white satin shoes on clean stones. And all of you were running right and left because the day was dark and you were afraid it was going to rain on your hay. Out come the hay carts and off you galloped through the fields.

“A week goes by; I see the prosecutor coming. Eight o’clock in the morning. What time did he have to leave home to get here at eight in the morning? Home? He lived in Grenoble, three days away. Where did he spend the night? In Clelles or Mens? Where? Why come from Grenoble in the dark, gliding through the night in a buggy all the way to Clelles or Mens and then sleep there so he could arrive at my place the next morning at eight?

“He sits down; I give him his coffee. He doesn’t say a thing to me. He’s listening to Langlois whistling a little tune upstairs in his bedroom the way he does every morning when he shaves. We’re both there; he’s sitting, I’m standing, and between us is the marble table, the coffee in a glass (because the prosecutor always drinks his coffee in a glass, never in a cup), and in the glass, a teaspoon. We’re listening to Langlois whistle. We know he’s shaving. And all of a sudden he stops whistling. I lean on the marble table and the teaspoon starts clinking against the glass. And Langlois begins to whistle again. He’d only stopped because he was shaving a difficult spot, around the mouth or on the throat. I stand up straight and go into my kitchen. The prosecutor drinks his coffee.

“You all had brought in the hay and now it was the potatoes. Ha! Not even the normal harvest potatoes, because the harvest is in October and we were in July; they were new potatoes, *fingerlings*, ever so fancy! A week goes by. Madame Tim arrives. She looks through my window to see if I’m inside. But this time I open the door. I say to her, ‘Maybe he’s in the little square; he left five minutes ago.’ She heads there. She doesn’t choose the clean stones. She’s a grandmother. She’s a lady. She’s practically running. The rest of you are caught up with your fingerlings. One or the other of you is always going off to Pré-Villars with your spade and your basket.

“No sooner had Madame Tim turned the corner than I heard trotting: the prosecutor. This time, how’d he manage to get there at three in the afternoon? Where had he slept? Isn’t it exactly as if it had only taken him two days to get here instead of three? I said to him, ‘Langlois is probably in the little square. A minute ago Madame Tim went to look for him.’ What are you supposed to serve a prosecutor at three in the afternoon? ‘Oh, a coffee!’ he says, ‘Just a coffee,’ as if he didn’t have the time to choose something else.

“For the rest of you then, this is when the wheat ripens, is about to be ripe. The harvest. Another week goes by . . . This time, no Madame Tim or prosecutor, but me. It’s four in the afternoon. I take off my slippers. I climb the stairs barefoot, avoiding the step that creaks. I listen at the door. I place my ear against the wall and listen. I peek through the keyhole. I see two limp legs hanging off the bed. I open his door. You hear me? I open his door!

“Down in the street one of you is sharpening a scythe with more than two thousand idiotic strikes of the hammer.

“I open his door: it’s a pair of trousers he’s left on the edge of the bed to get the proper crease. He’d gone out when I must not have been paying attention.

“And you, the rest of you, you’re all tied up with your harvest! Can’t lose one handful of grain, can you? And you didn’t, that’s for sure. I even see one of you coming in from the field with a handful of corn that he must have picked up on his way back. What are you? Canaries?

“Another week goes by. Madame Tim arrives. And he’s there, by the way. He’d come down from his room. He was watching me chop chard leaves. And I wasn’t about to stop; if Madame Tim hadn’t come, I would have liquefied them. I was scared he would leave if I stopped chopping, or even raised my head.

“Madame Tim invites him to a party they’ll be giving in Saint-Baudille three days later, it seems. Her daughters, sons-in-law, and grandchildren will all be there. It’s a kind of anniversary. She’s speaking a bit too much and too quickly, the way she did when we went to the home of that gray woman. She invites me. She says they wrote to the prosecutor and he accepted.

“And then Langlois starts to smile.

“I understood his smile only later: that lovely smile he had, the one that ran along his serpentine mustache. It was all so obvious. If the prosecutor had already accepted the invitation, it must have been in the works for a long time. And Langlois was only being told at the last second?

“But by the time I’d understood that smile, Madame Tim and he had gone for a little stroll. He was in a good mood; he had accepted the invitation.

“So that night we finally slept like logs. And the rest of you with your hay, your wheat, and your dung, you could go screw yourselves.

“So it was on August third that Madame Tim invited us. It was on August third that she yanked me out of my scullery to get me up to speed about her plans.

“My scullery isn’t big. Madame Tim was a fine figure of a woman; I wasn’t thin either. We were squeezed up together, face-to-face. Her words were warm on my face. The words of a very good idea. But I had it figured out long before.

“There was no sense in trying to influence me when it comes to that full-length portrait that Langlois had stared at until his eyes were pigeon eggs and his cheeks wore the print of an armchair. My mother stitched boots and my father was a hummingbird. There were no full-length portraits in my mother’s house. Yet God knows I’d stared at bitumen portraits and been dazed by the gilt reflections on large picture frames on those evenings when, in the off-season, I lay on my folding cot listening for the footsteps of soldiers on midnight leave outside on the sidewalk.

“So, as far as good ideas are concerned, we know what they’re worth.

“It was something for me to pull off my slippers, climb to the second floor avoiding the step that creaks, listen at the door, peek through the keyhole, and make my heart beat fast; and for what? For a pair of pants half hanging off the bed!

“As for that *lover of souls*, hadn’t he come by again and again with his big bulging belly to drink coffee at my place?

“Don’t go telling me he set off from Grenoble in his buggy to sleep in Clelles, Mens, or Monétier, and got here at eight on the dot in the morning, all for my coffee. I don’t think that highly of my coffee. Can I tell you? My coffee was no longer worth a damn. That’s what needed to be said.

“And the coffee of the *lover of souls* wasn’t worth a damn, and Madame Tim’s coffee wasn’t worth a damn. We were losing Langlois.

“The way things were going, everyone would lose him.

“That guy who understood friendship so well, oh! And then that guy all warm and fuzzy, with his little mustache and the smile that slithered under it, and that nationalistic tone of his, and that cutting tone of his, and that way he had of being sure of himself, and of making *you sure of yourself*!

“You’ve never needed anyone to *make you sure of yourselves*, have you? Your cow dung tells you everything you need to know, right? It’s your Big Dipper and your North Star, right? And when you kick the bucket (the Church can carry on all it wants), there will be an inflatable cow hovering above your deathbed, taking good aim. Too bad for you when a big fat ball of cow dung, brown and steaming, finally spreads and splatters smack in your face! Go ahead and save face then!

“You never needed someone who could *make you sure of yourselves*, did you? You never suffered from waiting, then getting, then losing!

“Madame Tim kept telling me her good idea, but I barely listened. I said to myself, and I said to her, but not out loud, ‘Your coffee isn’t worth a damn, your coffee isn’t worth a damn.’

“And I backed up as much as possible against the wall where my pots hung, because we were two big women, face-to-face in that narrow scullery; we were breathing hard, my breasts were rubbing against Madame Tim’s, and even though she was a café au lait woman, I didn’t like it.

“Madame Tim’s idea was very good.

“On the morning of the sixth, the sky was blue as far as the eye could see. I got up at dawn. The trees were having a big discussion.

“Langlois saddled his horse. The animal was as happy as I was.

“I heard him talking with his master in the stable. Are you idiots even able to understand what horses say? That one seemed to be chuckling: ‘So, old bean, now’s the time to spend every cent in our pockets; we’re going to paint the town red.’

“And if you listened to what the trees were saying, horse and master were also talking about an amazing freedom of some sort.

“The whole clan was in Saint-Baudille.

“And do you know how we got there? Well, there I was in all my finery, walking some hundred meters on foot next to Langlois while he drags his horse along by the bridle, when he says to me, ‘Get on.’

“ ‘On what?’

“ ‘The horse.’

“ ‘The way I am?’

“ ‘The way you are.’

“He makes a stirrup with his hands for me to put my foot in and he lifts me up so I can sit in the saddle.

“Would I have missed that opportunity? Not on your life! I didn’t give a damn about my bustle. If it gave me a problem, I’d take it off. I’d tied it on with braid trim; I’d just have to slip my hands under and pull.

“Quick as I’m telling you this, I was on the horse. And too bad for the wrinkles. There’s a big silk bow on my backside, but I’m walking on air. I’d held on to my parasol. He said to me, ‘Open it and act like a duchess.’

“He didn’t have to tell me twice. Off we went! And that’s how we got to Saint-Baudille.

“After a league we ran into Bouvard who was coming to get me with the carriage. He was coming up from the Ébron while we were on our way down. We yell to him, ‘Stop, old girl!’

“But we must have looked so fine that he goes on climbing and, when he gets to where we are, he says, ‘What about me?’

“To which I answer, ‘You, big fellow, just follow us from behind.’

“I was only afraid of one thing: that Langlois would make me change ship, but not at all. ‘And mind your manners, my good man,’ he said, winking.

“ ‘Hell, girl!’ said Bouvard, ecstatic.

“He understood perfectly that it was all about having a good time in the surroundings.

“And what surroundings! The fields were beaded with dew where wheat had been cut and the whole expanse was as rosy as butter. The sky was as blue as a new wheelbarrow. All around us the larks sounded like a knife squeaking in a green apple, while soft, spicy scents tickled our noses like snuff. Before my eyes, the forests and groves danced like the hair on a goat to the beat of a drum. What a beautiful morning!

“Obviously, Madame Tim had nothing to do with that particular beauty. But the beauty that was waiting for us at Saint-Baudille, and that she had created, was just like English sucking candy: slightly acidic, fresh, multicolored, shot through with lemon, vinegar, and azure. A peppermint to make you strong as an ox!

“First, her three daughters: Cadiche, Arnaude, and Mathilda. Ah! Those convent women know how to dress their daughters! Because Madame Tim looked after the business (it was much too mischievous for it to have been anyone else).

“Ah! Sons-in-law! Letting your little women run around like that! But they were bigwig pencil pushers, and do pencil pushers have any common sense? Even though they gave those girls, let’s see—three and three is six, plus five—eleven children, why stop there if you have any common sense?

“Ha! Pen and paper make people do such ridiculous things!

“Eleven children underfoot like a puddleful of birds. The horse stood with one leg in the air for fear of crushing one of them. And I didn’t dare set my own feet on the ground. I shouted, ‘Hey, you fool! Get me off of here!’

“Oh, indeed! He winked and left me stuck on my horse so he could run off with those swanky little rascals!

“Oh! What a man! And he knew how to live. The fool!

“Saint-Baudille was superb. Couldn’t have been better for taking your mind off things; so much so that no idea could stick.

“Cadiche? If it was Cadiche, her face was rosy and round; round and rosy with the most beautiful smile in the world, a smile that lasted a long time, and those serious eyes that knew the price of a smile.

“Arnaude? Enough to stroll back and forth on the terrace for days. What’s the point of dancing or waltzing when you could get more out of a stroll like this? More agility, more rhythm, more euphoria than from a waltz. And as for a *danger of the moment*, those lovers of one thing and the other had here, I imagine, a much more dangerous danger. I saw her little pointed shoes stick out from below her dress with each step she took, one after the other, preceded by a tiny, precise command that began with the satin at her hips and ran down to the ground beneath her skirt like a little lash of the whip, and I don’t know if that soft rustling I heard was the sound of her footsteps on the gravel or the voice she used to whisper to her partner as she bent her head ever so slightly toward his shoulder.

“Mathilda? She was my favorite (if I’d been a man): a beautiful doe, a beautiful female with fur, lying on her stomach in the summer savory.

“The prosecutor was dressed to the nines, he was! In fact, he strolled on the terrace with Arnaude. And you know what? Well, those fat men are very agile.

“There were people from Mens and a doctor from Grenoble. And they introduced me as Madame Tim’s friend, and Madame Tim sat next to me most of the time. And we looked at everything.

“Langlois? You couldn’t tell him apart from anyone else: Cadiche, Arnaude, Mathilda, the doctor, an old lady from Mens who I suppose was Madame Savignan but who, in any case, was not just anyone because sometimes her eyes were swathed in sadness. And naturally, Captain Tim. Langlois spent time with all of them, even with the prosecutor who was avoiding him. I saw his game. I told Madame Tim about it. And she said that all three of us were avoiding him, not just the prosecutor but Madame Tim and I, too—or rather, she said, we are keeping a *respectable distance*.

“The accuracy of this idea struck me. That beautiful morning, had Langlois and I exchanged any words? Not a one. A couple with Bouvard. But between him and me, not a one.

“Of course, I could always claim I’d imagined he was just as blissfully happy as I was; that we left each

other in peace to enjoy it. Hypocrisy! I was keeping a *respectable distance* from him. That's the truth. Respectable? Not really. Respectable hypocrisy. Selfish: I was keeping a selfish distance. I was using the excuse of the beauty of the morning and the peace we *ordinarily* leave friends in at those times to keep my distance. Not only to keep my distance but to enjoy the beauty of the flowers on my own. These were not *ordinary* circumstances. *That's* selfishness. Nasty creatures that we are!

"I couldn't stop myself from mentioning it to Madame Tim. She told me not to dig too deeply.

" 'I've reserved the word "respectable" for myself,' she said. 'But you and the prosecutor are no worse than I am.'

"It was one of those occasions when she put her hand on mine and tapped me gently on the glove.

"Still. My good mood was gone. Even if all Saint-Baudille had tried to get that idea out of my head, I wasn't going to take any pleasure watching Langlois strolling with Arnaude on the terrace. When those little quick commands left her satin hips, wending their way down under her skirt to land on that pointy little foot, and when those same little slow waltzing commands wound their way up from her hips to Arnaude's swanlike neck, I said to myself, 'Do whatever you want, girl, but keep a *respectable distance*.'

"We were scheduled to spend three days at the château.

"Madame Tim must have been thinking much like me. While the rest of the company was busy playing battledore and shuttlecock, she said to me, 'Come along, let's go see.'

"What was there to see, I wondered. Everything and nothing, naturally. One doesn't have all that much at one's disposal on this earth.

"She wanted us to make a sort of tour of the property. Arm in arm, we climbed up the three terraces (but why?). The view got wider and wider. At last we reached the rooftop terrace on which they'd even placed an orange tree in a crate.

"Next we went into a vestibule that I knew well from all the times I'd been there before; she had no need to take me to see it again. It was larger than the three rooms of the Café de la Route put together and it was, just as it was, a very pleasant place to be, cool, fragrant with the scent of balsam fir, with paintings of aviaries and birds covered with ribbons and feathers on all sides. But I said to myself, 'We'll see about that.'

"We were walking in step, Madame Tim and I, at the slow pace of two grand, fat, fully mature women, on carpets as thick as first-cut hay. We crossed through the sitting room full of heavy armoires with gilded books behind glass doors. On the walls the bird paintings continued.

"Then she led me into a room I had rarely seen. It was a theater, just like a real theater but in miniature, with a stage at the back hidden behind a red curtain painted with birds flying around a huge figure with terribly empty eyes and a mouth open as wide as a carnival ball-toss clown. We remained there for a moment, facing the stage, high up in this room where the slightest noise could be heard; we could hear my nails grating as they gripped the satin of Madame Tim's sleeve.

"I'd been in this room a few times before. Each time I felt so uneasy that I left right away.

"This time, however, I was attached to Madame Tim's arm. She stood there in front of the stage in order to *make me see*, as she had everywhere else in the château (a sort of inspection of her troops; of *our* troops). She was far from suspecting what that theater made me see.

"I saw the little café where at sixteen I'd tried to earn my living honorably by singing 'Berg Op Zoom.' And I could picture the tiled floor of the orchestra pit in this château, neat and clean, full of marble tables dripping with beer and lemonade while I moved around asking for coins, carrying my little tray at which I would steal a glance, all while smiling at everyone in a very businesslike manner and saying to myself, 'Good. Now I've got enough to pay my rent. Good: there's my chop. Good: there's my café au lait.' The same tray on which, as time passed, there was no more coffee, no more chop, no more rent, just enough to buy a little cigar to smoke myself into a stupor in the waiters' lavatory. Until that evening when a miller stroked my behind and said, 'Well, this girl has the stuff in any case.'

"I don't mean to say that there's anything extraordinary about my story. I'm just trying to explain to you that Madame Tim might have had a lot of hope tied up in all that: terraces, vestibules, salons, theater; and maybe I lacked experience in regard to terraces, vestibules, and salons, but as to the theater, you couldn't fool me. I knew what went into making *that*, and I could easily imagine, in another scheme of things, the same ingredients going into the terraces, vestibules, and salons. Making an indigestible dish. I know what I'm talking about. If you force yourself, you'll vomit. And some people would rather drop dead than go on vomiting their whole life; some people do whatever it takes to eat something digestible.

"Ceding to the pressure of Madame Tim's arm, I turned around slowly with her to go back into the salon, and I said to myself, 'We'll see about that.'

"We went back through the salon. As we were re-entering the vestibule to pass to the other wing of the

château (judging from the direction that Madame Tim was pulling me in), someone behind us coughed discreetly. It was the prosecutor.

"He was like a bloated balloon, enormous and very light, riding on the tip of the wind. His anxious eyes wondered which way that wind was blowing.

" 'Come,' Madame Tim said to him.

"We let go of each other and he placed himself between the two of us: Madame Tim on his right arm and I on his left. He was as tall as we were and twice as fat, but he walked at our pace. And this is how we entered the large dining room.

"The table was set for the evening meal. Four big French doors, through which the ashen afternoon came in and lit the long table gleaming with crystal. Ceremonial decanters filled with lovely purple wine oversaw the aquatic rippling of a whole host of spotless silverware, milky pools of porcelain, and the twinkling of a thousand tiny broken rainbows that burst from the crystal glassware's beveled edges like a water lily in bloom.

"We walked around the table very seriously, all three of us together, side by side. The stomach that, with every step, the prosecutor shoved out of the way with a thrust of his thigh gave even more gravitas to our stroll.

"First we passed along the French doors that separated two frontiers, with on one side those terraces under the ashen sun, the lawns, the yews pruned in a checkerboard pattern, the balustrades, and in the distance, league after league of pearly mountains rising above vast carpets of rosy wheat; and on the other side, that miraculous lagoon of the long table with its crystal waters.

"At the far end, we turned and walked back in step, moving along the other side of the table and inspecting the whole series of large and small Venetian mirrors where thousands of tiny reflections of our three solemn selves framed the one big reflection of our three solemn selves as we passed. And I said to myself, 'We'll see about that.'

"When we returned to the vestibule, we climbed the staircase in unison. The stairs were low, marble, and easy to climb; our fat bodies rose one step at a time, and I said to myself, 'Heave-ho! Heave-ho! How far up are you going to have us go? All the way until we've found the one who has the cure?'

"We were so enormous that the huge landing of the second floor on which the collection of antique instruments was housed began to tremble as we approached its old guitars and old pianos. And when all three of us stepped on the landing together, hauling our three fat bodies in a final effort, those wild drums that Madame Tim had brought from her country and hung on the walls began dully beating some sort of somber 'call to arms.' We were very imposing. And we really wanted to give orders to all that to carry out some brilliant exploit. And I said to myself, 'We'll see about that.'

"I realized where Madame Tim was taking us. We went along the hall and turned right, so that we wound up facing the third set of double doors.

"That's where I'd seen a servant carry Langlois's cantle. Madame Tim opened the door.

"We entered a vast bedroom but instinctively all of us stopped short and stood at attention at the threshold of the first carpet: it was Langlois's bedroom.

"The only thing there that was his was the small portmanteau of the captain-commander-horseman resting on the shoe stand.

"The bedroom was enormous and peaceful and I was impressed by Madame Tim's intelligence, which was altogether equal to the intelligence of that man who possessed a *deep knowledge of human things*. The room was meant for Langlois, and here the heavy gray-blue linen drapes were extensions of vaster and still more peaceful vistas. All that time we stood there, I let myself be taken and enfolded by the folding and unfolding of those artificial vistas with a soft evening wind wafting through the half-open window. And I said to myself, 'We'll see about that.'

"After the evening meal, the gaming tables were set up in the salon.

"Do you know what my impression was? It seemed to me that Madame Tim, the prosecutor, and I were giving orders with a hunting horn.

"Langlois seemed to be saying: Wine from Chirouzes? Why not? I can easily drink your Chirouzes. Roast pork *à la maman Rose*? I'll gladly eat your roast pork with carrots, onions, garlic, shallots, parsley, thyme, bay leaf, vin gris. I like it all. Duck salami? Of course. I'll take some. Cardoons *à la piémontaise*? I'd love some. And I'll have a conversation with Arnaude, who is sitting on my left batting her eyelashes, that's my business. And I know how to recognize the petal-soft words of Cadiche on my right, don't worry, you'll see, I know how to handle it. A smile across the table to the old lady from Mens? Done. And did you see? It was very well done. She's all aquiver in her jet-black gorget. Ah! The prosecutor! I haven't forgotten him, do not fear; I've forgotten no one. You can't imagine the memory you need to survive those empty, frozen expanses. Look: the prosecutor, with his *deep knowledge of human things*, is in heaven.

Why? Is it a mystery? No, it's simple: a gesture that reminds him of the long-forgotten gestures of his youth, gestures we made long ago. And that I do remember. Monsieur Tim? Monsieur Tim will love me all his life. I just told him something he's been waiting to hear for the last twenty years. Don't worry about Mathilda; it's all taken care of. It was enough not to wander off but to extend my arm to her and to make our legs touch at least once as we walked, as if by accident, but from hip to heel. That's done. Don't forget I'm the one who escorted her to the table. Do you think I would risk neglecting Mathilda? The desert is a country of diplomats. I mustn't take a single risk, I can't even tell you where I'm going and where I'm taking you, Madame Tim, my dear friend—of saying to you, for example, that it's not you who will lead me, kindly and maternally, to go to the right around this bush or to leave my footprints in that soft snow; it's not you who makes your hunting-horn players blow. It's me. I'm the one who pulls the breath from deep within your hunting-horn players' lungs and out through the instrument to make *your* orders blare above the forests. Of course I'm not going to tell you this; I mean to remain the man I am: for me to awaken your feminine susceptibilities or to destroy in one fell swoop your timeless conception of things would be too foolish for words. This is why, Madame Tim, I smile at you like a wolf in sheep's clothing; it's why there's a lovely sway to my hips and why I take off as swiftly as a long gray bird, with a smile as charming as the day is beautiful, from those distant pearly mountains on carpets of rose wheat all the way to those false open spaces of gray linen that you so intelligently wound around the bedroom where my little wolf's luggage has been deposited. And, my clever old Sausage, I couldn't even share this with you!

"If I looked at him too closely, he would wink at me kindly and avert his eyes.

"On the third day, while the horses were being hitched to the wagons, Madame Tim, the prosecutor, and I met up at the edge of the rooftop terrace, near the little orange tree in its crate that would have to be taken double-quick into the greenhouse; near the little orange tree and in front of the vast vistas (which would have to be taken down double-quick as well, like a folding partition that blocks the air). We were all silent until at last I spoke, because no one else had dared: 'All that's left to do is to take our places in the quadrille.' And I headed down toward the carriage that was waiting for me."

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"Two months later, in the fall, he started to build the Bongalove. Whenever he was on-site, I would go see him. I didn't say oh, it's big, or why are you putting windows there, or why did you start this whole thing when winter is coming? A word seemed to be nothing but a word at first glance, but I had very little faith in words.

"I only asked him something once, when I saw him clearing out the spot where we are now. I said to him, 'What are you going to make here, with this gorgeous view?'

" 'A maze,' he said.

" 'A maze?' (At the time, I was thinking of something else.)

" 'Yes, a boxwood maze, like the one in Saint-Baudille.'

"Now I understood: those little paths crisscrossing through big boxwoods; I can't say I like them much. I said to him, 'And what the hell are you going to do with a maze?'

" 'Well, what does one ordinarily do with a maze?' he asked.

" 'I don't know,' I answered. 'I'm not used to that sort of thing. I don't do anything with a maze in any case.'

" 'Well, I'll stroll around in it.'

" 'Oh,' I said to him. 'That's news to me. Come have a drink. It's hot like the middle of summer.'

" 'What are you offering?'

" 'Vespetro.'

" 'Sounds good.'

"And we came back to the village together."

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"Winter, snow. Construction stopped but the walls were already covered, and since they were made of heavy logs, the freeze couldn't harm them. On the contrary.

"Langlois came down from his bedroom to smoke his pipe in the café where it was warm.

"You all were somewhere else; nothing to harvest, so out came your playing cards.

"And Langlois sat sideways on a chair in front of the window. I left him plenty of time to smoke his pipe, and then came to sit next to him with my darning basket holding two or three pairs of his socks.

"I said, 'Father Lambert, light the stove for us.'

“And old man Lambert began to poke the fire. The stove hummed. The snow fell.
“ ‘I’m getting married,’ Langlois said to me.
“(I was digging around in my basket for my boxwood darning egg.)
“ ‘Good idea,’ I said.
“ ‘It will only be a good idea if you take care of it.’
“ ‘Take care of it? How?’
“ ‘Find someone for me.’
“(I was unspooling a length of cotton.)
“ ‘And for what reason, exactly?’ I asked him.
“ ‘Oh, exactly . . .’ he said.
“(Old man Lambert stirred the fire like a true master. We sat and basked in the heat.)
“ ‘I have an idea,’ I said.
“ ‘I thought you might,’ he said.
“ ‘But I want to know what you have in mind.’
“ ‘You do. I want to get married.’
“ ‘Have you told anyone else?’ I asked him.
“ ‘No.’
“ ‘Not Madame Tim?’
“ ‘No.’
“ ‘The prosecutor?’
“ ‘No.’
“ ‘And why me?’
“ ‘Just a feeling.’
“ ‘What kind of feeling?’
“ ‘That you know better what I need.’
“ ‘Could be,’ I said.
“ ‘At my age . . .’ he said.
“ ‘I’ve seen older,’ I said.
“ ‘Oh, so have I!’ he said.
“ ‘I at least have to know the type you’re looking for.’
“ ‘No type in particular. As long as she’s not an embroiderer,’ he said, turning his chair to face me.
“I continued darning socks. Then I raised my head, took off my glasses, and rubbed my eyes. That’s how I could look straight at him (well, what I call straight at him—through my fingers).
“ ‘Obviously,’ I said.
“ ‘Why obviously?’
“ ‘You don’t need any embroidery done.’
“ ‘That’s about right,’ he said.
“ ‘And would you stay here?’ I asked.
“ ‘In the Bongalove,’ he said. ‘Could that fit your idea?’ he added. I hadn’t said anything.
“ ‘It could indeed,’ I said.
“ ‘Not an embroiderer,’ he said again. ‘And not what you’d call a “good wife.” ’
“ ‘What’s *your* idea of a “good wife”?’ I said.
“ ‘Life-size portrait,’ he answered.
“ ‘All right,’ I said.
“ ‘I’ll have the walls plastered,’ he said. ‘It will be clean and warm, but I don’t need someone who takes pride in her housework.’
“ ‘But there’ll be furniture?’
“ ‘Of course. She’ll have everything she needs, but I don’t want to be surrounded by objects.’
“(Langlois’s allusions right away made me think of the embroiderer and that furniture storehouse she lived in, where that life-size portrait was surrounded by all those things. But I was also thinking of other surroundings, from pearly mountains to linen curtains, not to mention crystal-covered tables and three sagging old folks walking arm in arm.)
“ ‘Obviously,’ I said.
“ ‘You find everything obvious today,’ he said.
“ ‘And isn’t it?’ I said.
“ ‘It is. Precisely,’ he said.
“ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘what you need is simply a woman who’s had a life.’
“ ‘And “of an appropriate age,” no?’ he said, a little sarcastically.

“ ‘Not necessarily,’ I said (choosing needles and lifting them one after the other up to the light of the window). ‘There are situations in which a woman gains experience very quickly.’

“ ‘She just needs to be satisfied with little.’

“ ‘That’s exactly what I mean when I say that one year in the service is as good as two,’ I said. ‘How old are you?’

“ ‘You know how old I am.’

“ ‘How old?’

“ ‘Fifty-six.’

“ ‘I don’t recommend someone thirty-five,’ I said. ‘They get sentimental at that age.’

“ ‘Let’s say thirty, then. Can you find me that?’

“ ‘Easily.’

“And that day we spoke no more about it, as someone said.

“Another time, in similar circumstances, a dark winter evening, with him sitting sideways on his chair, and me sitting next to him on my little stool while he watched the snowdrifts collapse and I was mending holes in a flannel vest.

“ ‘They’re from my pipe.’

“ ‘You fill your pipe on your flannel vest?’

“ ‘No, I stuff it too tightly; when I light it, the embers overflow.’

“ ‘Well, don’t stuff it so much, and smoke two.’

“ ‘Or stuff them more and smoke three,’ he said.

“ ‘Why?’ I asked. ‘What’s the hurry?’

“ ‘No hurry,’ he said. ‘By the way, have you thought about your thirty-year-old woman?’

“ ‘No need to think about it. If we want her, we just have to go get her.’

“ ‘Where?’

“ ‘I know just where. But we have to go to Grenoble. I have lots of connections there.’

“ ‘Perfect,’ he said. ‘That’s one less thing to worry about.’

“ ‘Were you worried?’

“ ‘Not a bit,’ he said.

“Another bone-cold day, he puts on his fur jacket and cap, takes up his snowshoes, and says to me, ‘Cook up a little something for me for tonight. I’m going to get some air.’

“ ‘Don’t get too much, it’s a bit rough out there. And what do you want me to cook up for you?’

“ ‘Cabbage soup,’ he says to me, ‘and go see if that old harpy Anselmie doesn’t have a partridge or two. I know she traps. And make me a cabbage gratin in the oven, with bread crumbs. In this weather, I could eat cabbage off the floor. And I’m sure there’s no cabbage in Saint-Baudille.’

“ ‘Are you going to see Madame Tim?’

“ ‘Well, I might mention that thirty-year-old woman to her,’ he said. ‘What do you think?’

“ ‘I think you should,’ I said. ‘And do you know what else I think?’

“ ‘I’m sure I’ll find out,’ he says.

“ ‘I think,’ I said to him, ‘that I’m going to scare the wits out of Anselmie until she gives me six partridges. And I think, along with that cabbage of yours, I’m going to make some mushrooms à la crème, and, finally, I think I’m going to take over the bedroom on the third floor, light a fire, and put a bed warmer in the bed. Because I’m almost sure that if you talk to Madame Tim about that thirty-year-old woman, Madame Tim will come back with you this evening.’

“ ‘Good thinking indeed,’ he said, ‘except for the six partridges. What the hell are we going to do with those?’

“ ‘Two for you, two for Madame Tim, and two for me,’ I said to him. ‘You don’t expect me to eat in the kitchen, do you?’

“ ‘Well, that *would* be your place,’ he said, cautiously stepping back as if he were afraid.

“I threw my clog after him.

“I had no doubt that Madame Tim would come running, I just wasn’t sure about the time.

“I said to myself, ‘In the early evening. He’ll get there and have lunch. He’ll speak to her about it after lunch; they’ll have their coffee; she’ll have the horses hitched to the sleigh, and when the clock strikes four, they’ll be here.’

“But at three o’clock I heard the bells on the horses. She must have deprived him of his coffee, or else they drank it in a hurry.

“She gave no orders; Madame Tim hopped off the sleigh as if she were twenty years old; she entered my kitchen.

“ ‘Tell me everything,’ she said.

“She was curious.

“ ‘I didn’t cook the partridges for the King of Prussia,’ I said to her, ‘so settle down! Your bed is ready and, around six or seven this evening, I’ll go and stuff a copper bed warmer in it. I’ve given you my lavender-scented sheets and the whole works. Send Bouvard back. You’re dining with us tonight. We’ll tell each other everything. But if we have to think of Bouvard freezing to death out there and if, after eating the partridges and talking, you’ve got to go back to Saint-Baudille at the risk of breaking your neck in the middle of the night, we won’t say anything to each other or we’ll say it badly. Trust me: we’re keeping you here.’

“Five minutes later, Bouvard was gone: vanished from the face of the earth. Not a track in front of the door, and Madame Tim might as well have been transported here by the Holy Spirit.

“ ‘And that’s not all,’ I told her. ‘By time and toil we sever what force and rage could never. Not a word about it before dinner. Do you want to talk about it while we’re making the cabbage? No. Give me an hour and I’ll toss out the three old men by the fire. I’ll close the front doors and the night will be ours. We’ll put the table for the three of us right in the middle where it’s warm. And the big lamp. So let’s get moving. It will be worth it, don’t you think? In the meantime, would you mind putting on an apron and peeling some celery root? We’ll make a salad.’

“She did it so nicely that I said, ‘See how it pays to be well behaved. And now the lady will offer you a bit of crème de cacao.’

“Langlois came in just as we were sipping.

“ ‘Don’t get up,’ he said.

“ ‘You’ve got your bottle of rum in the cupboard,’ I said to him. ‘No, not that one, that’s for my customers. The other one, next to the box of sugar. Which you can also take out if you feel like dunking a cube or two. And don’t count on us to serve you, my sweet love.’

“It’s not like I was completely at ease with my teasing. Before my two pals had arrived, I’d had a bit too much crème de cacao. To calm my nerves.

“In fact, after the third little glass that Madame Tim refused, and drank anyway, I realized she thought it was a good approach. She began to make those sweet little smiles and whenever she was about to say, ‘So?’ I put a finger to my lips: ‘Shhhh. Another tiny glass?’

“ ‘Very tiny.’

“Langlois took three good swigs of rum. It was white rum. I was aging it in a small cedar barrel and from time to time I’d draw a liter just for him.

“ ‘It’s hot in here!’ Madame Tim said.

“It was time to toss out the three lads by the stove.

“ ‘Already?’ said old man Lambert. ‘It’s only five o’clock.’

“I said to him, ‘I’ve got company.’

“ ‘And we’re not company?’ he asked.

“ ‘Company from another world, understand?’ I replied.

“ ‘No,’ he said.

“ ‘Well, too bad,’ I said. ‘Go warm up at your daughter-in-law’s.’

“ ‘Nothing doing. I’m going to bed,’ he said.

“ ‘Good idea. Sweet dreams.’

“ ‘I never have sweet dreams.’

“ ‘Do what you want then,’ I said.

“ ‘If I did what I wanted,’ he said, ‘I’d stay here.’

“ ‘What a nuisance you are!’

“I swept up the sawdust, especially around the stove. They were spitters, those bastards! Madame Tim wanted to do it, but I took the broom from her hands.

“ ‘No,’ I said. ‘Open the big cupboard and take out a tablecloth.’

“I didn’t know how she’d react to the old men’s spit. Everything had started off so well, I didn’t want it to end with a queasy woman. That’s the advantage of people like me. We’ve paid our dues, so we might as well make the most of it.

“I spread fresh sawdust around the stove and we dragged the table there, into the warmth. With the first mouthfuls, naturally Madame Tim asked, ‘So now, tell me what he was trying to tell to me.’

“ ‘Is he that feebleminded, then?’ I said.

“ ‘It’s not a question of being feebleminded,’ she said.

“ ‘I know,” I said. ‘Let’s just look on the bright side here.’

“I told her about that winter afternoon and how Langlois had let me know he wanted to get married. I repeated everything: his meaningless sentences and my own—my reserve. I wanted Madame Tim to see

the scene exactly as it had taken place. If you ask me, if you wanted to see the event and its causes and consequences clearly, you had to know everything about that winter afternoon and Langlois's short sentences.

" 'Perhaps you wanted me to tell you the history of France from Vercingetorix until now,' Langlois said to me.

" 'This isn't about the history of France,' I answered, 'but let's say if you had told it to me, the mood would have been entirely different and I would have answered you differently. I would have had a different idea.'

" 'Like what?'

" 'A queen of France. A notary's daughter. A patented broodmare. A young wench with a family tree.'

"(Madame Tim didn't flinch; on the contrary, she sent me a little 'bravo!' out of the corner of her eye.)

" 'Fine,' said Langlois. 'I escaped by the skin of my teeth. Well, I didn't tell you the history of France. What do you infer from that?'

"I poured myself a nice big glass of wine, tasted it, smacked my lips, and said, 'Nothing at all.'

" 'Perfect,' said Langlois. 'That's exactly right. There's nothing to infer.'

"Madame Tim was wading through a hundred ceremonies, her own wedding ceremony, those of her sons and daughters. She didn't dare use the word 'love' but she did say 'delicacies and organists.' I made her understand that as for 'delicacies' (I looked at Langlois for approval, and he gave it to me), well, that was saying a bit much.

"Well then, organists in any case. Madame Tim would not back down about the organists. But there was no need to worry; it was just the crème de cacao talking. Crème de cacao is a very wedding-march drink.

"I, however, went straight for Langlois.

" 'Don't infer anything from that. So you want everything to be respectable on all three sides?'

" 'Exactly.'

" 'What are those three sides?' asked Madame Tim. (Best not to leave the bottle next to Madame Tim, I thought; otherwise soon she won't understand a word we're saying.)

" 'There is Langlois's side,' I said to Madame Tim, tracing it on the tablecloth with the tip of my knife. 'On Langlois's side, Langlois doesn't want us to infer anything, that is, plan anything, don't you see? No plans about what's going to happen. Because he wants to be free to make whatever he wants happen. Then there's the side of the lady we're supposed to be telling he's going to marry her, but there's nothing for her to infer from that.'

"('Isn't that so?' I asked Langlois, pointing my knife in the air. 'It is,' he said.)

" 'And then there's this side' (I traced a third line with the tip of my knife on the new tablecloth), 'the side we're on: you, Madame Tim, the prosecutor, me. On that side, the third side, where his friends are, Langlois also doesn't want anything to be inferred from that.'

"(And because Madame Tim remained wide-eyed, I added: 'Let's not have any illusions about all this.')

" 'Bravo,' Langlois said stonily. 'No, really, bravo! Bravo from the bottom of my heart. You are an extraordinary woman.'

" 'There is a fourth side,' I went on.

" 'No,' said Langlois. 'The fourth side is all the other people. I don't give a damn about them. As far as my getting married is concerned, I don't have to appear respectable to the other people. Other than myself and the woman willing to take the risk, only my friends deserve respect, and in this case respect means *no illusions for anyone at all*.'

"Madame Tim was hallelujahing (I thought). She patted Langlois's hand with her fingertips, without saying a word.

" 'Let's not get sentimental,' I said. In a marriage, normally there are two people. We were talking about marriage but for the moment all I could see was one man. Respect, illusions, and inferences—all this was very lovely, but a woman had to be found. And there are times when I don't back out; I would find her. It remained to be seen if the woman would be up to the task. I know a lot of things, but not everything, and I was very happy that Madame Tim was there to put her two cents in.

" 'Do you think we could adjust the stove?' Madame Tim said.

"It was true: it was very warm. I shut the damper and pushed in the bottom drawer.

" 'Here's what I've been turning over in my little noggin,' I said. 'If we talk to those silly geese the way we've been talking, there will be squawking. They'll have their theories, they'll get all excited, they'll want to *arrange things*, a marriage is *for life*. I don't see how you'll be able to manage with that flock of fools. And that's not all; there's more; there's something horrible: the parents! Can you see yourself with a father-in-law and a mother-in-law? If that's what this is about—respectability and Camembert—don't

ask anything of me. Let me drink my wine in peace. You'll come get my broomstick when you need to; at that time, if you want, I'll show you how to use it, but until then, this is none of my business.'

"I'd said that, I added, to put a fine point on things for Madame Tim. She was an angel, but in the end, I have to say, she wasn't from my world; and maybe she had ideas of her own. She might imagine that in this business, I was trying to take all the credit.

"Madame Tim stood up, came around the table, and kissed me. It was sweet of her. I was embarrassed to be dripping with sweat because of the stove and my fire.

" 'I have no ideas,' she said to me. 'What idea could I possible have?'

" 'I don't know,' I said. 'Obviously you're more of a specialist in right thinking and all that; in what I personally believe to be a breeding ground for silly geese and boa constrictors; but you know them better than I do; maybe I'm wrong. Maybe dogs have managed to make a cat, and maybe you happen to know this cat?'

" 'No, no,' said Madame Tim. 'Dogs make dogs.'

"She returned to her seat and poured herself a glass of wine and drank it down boldly, the way I'd been doing since the beginning of the meal.

"I sized up Langlois, like I was measuring him for a coat.

" 'She needs to take you as you are?'

"He nodded.

" 'She has to accept Bongalove, mountain, endless snow?'

"(Yes.)

" 'Saint-Baudille,' said Madame Tim. 'Naturally my house will always be open to her.'

" 'That's very important,' I said.

"I went back to Langlois.

" 'No mother-in-law, father-in-law, sister-in-law, aunt, or cousin?'

"(No.)

" 'Not too old?'

"(No.)

" 'Not too ugly?'

"(No.)

" 'Not too stupid?'

"(No.)

" 'Pleasant to look at?'

"(Yes.)

" 'Well, that's that, then. And in the event we find this rare pearl, she also has to consider her new position to be the jewel in her crown?'

"(Yes.)

"There was a moment of silence.

" 'In my *profession*—' and then I broke off. 'First of all, I wanted to ask Madame Tim whether, in her domain, she wouldn't happen to know any divorcées who want to remarry, or any women who've been widowed several times and want to remarry, or—' But she cut me off and, with godlike calm and with no trace of crème de cacao in her voice, she spoke of entirely run-of-the-mill social situations much more *welcoming* (if that's the word) than the ones I mentioned.

" 'Well,' I said simply, 'that is my *profession*. With the slight difference that I made my husbands pay.'

" 'The other women as well,' said Madame Tim.

" 'And I changed husbands often.'

" 'The others too,' said Madame Tim.

" 'And what does the man say?' I asked Langlois.

" 'The man says that life is extremely short,' said Langlois.

"To keep my composure, I decided to look at this as a bit of hair-splitting in the middle of a rather long discussion. In any case, Madame Tim (who must have understood what I was thinking) right away began loudly holding forth about the profession, speaking precisely, knowledgeably, and with rare inspiration. Very charitable of her. In such a way (I realized later) that she took my breath away.

"For more than an hour we spoke only about underclothes and perfumes. So in the midst of flounces, petticoats, and the scent of iris, opopanax, and freshly cut hay everything was settled.

"Langlois was drinking rum in his wineglass.

"It was almost ten o'clock. We were going to bed. I led Madame Tim to her room. I slipped my hand between the sheets to make sure the bed warmer had done its job.

" 'Would you like me to help you?' I asked her.

“ ‘To do what?’

“ ‘Unpin your bun and brush out your hair,’ I said.

“ ‘Oh, don’t bother,’ she said. ‘I will hardly sleep a wink anyway. It’s a great sacrifice, isn’t it?’ she said, looking at me.

“I nodded, without saying a word.”

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“Naturally, the following week we received a visit from the prosecutor. I gave him his coffee. He patted his vest. His stomach made a noise like crinkled paper.

“ ‘Madame Tim wrote to me,’ he said.

“ ‘She did well,’ I answered.

“He asked me where I planned on finding that diamond in the rough.

“ ‘I’m well connected,’ I said.

“ ‘So am I,’ he said.

“I told him that, all in all, Langlois was not one to be satisfied with someone’s leftovers.

“The word terrified him.

“ ‘I only had the b-b-best of intentions,’ he stuttered. He’d blushed as red as a billiard ball and he had such a look of despair in his eyes that I realized he’d meant well. Deep down, if he had left anything at all, it wouldn’t have been a leftover; it would have been a sacrifice.

“Once the prosecutor had gone, there was nothing much to say about all that. Madame Tim came back five or six times. The prosecutor four or five times. Langlois went to Saint-Baudille once or twice. Mum’s the word: we talked about the freezes, the beautiful snow, the sleighs. And coffee.”

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“In the spring, Langlois said to me, ‘Are you ready?’

“ ‘I’ll be ready tomorrow morning,’ I answered. (Then I added:) ‘I can be ready sooner, if you want.’

“ ‘Tomorrow will do,’ he said, ‘but at seven in the morning. We’ll take the public coach.’

“That was the coach that came down from the pass. Not the one that comes through the village and carries the mail; the express that you have to catch on the roadside.

“I was ready at six o’clock. I went downstairs and sat in the dark. I heard him to-ing and fro-ing upstairs. I heard him put down his shaving brush on the marble mantel. He’d been shaving without whistling.

“We climbed the steep path to the old chapel to get to the main road. The sun was well up in a pink sky filled with angel mist.

“We didn’t have to wait long. The coach arrived, and Langlois stopped it with an authoritative wave of his hand. It’s not a regular stop in fact, and sometimes the drivers just gallop right past you as you wave.

“There were three empty seats in the coupé. We took two of them. I hadn’t yet noticed what Langlois was wearing: he’d put on his shepherd’s cloak. But, as he settled into his corner, the cloak fell open and I could see he’d dressed with care. He even had his famous opera hat in a box (it would have been too high for the coach ceiling).

“We had four traveling companions. Among them, Langlois seemed supernatural. And I began to tremble.

“The passenger next to me must have noticed. He asked me if I was cold, and Langlois offered me his cloak. I had to accept. It wouldn’t take much to tip him off.

“So Langlois removed his coat and covered me with it. Yes, he had dressed beautifully, in a way I was particularly fond of. He was not buttoned all the way to the throat; his outfit remained military. This gave it charm and was appropriate to his stature, and that gruff air of his and that habit of nibbling ever so slightly on his mustache; but the outfit had soft touches, like the flare of his collar and the big knot in his tie. All this was very moving on that black tiger. In any case, it was addressed to the feminine heart in a shrewd and precise way. And without any bowing and scraping.

“He had settled into his corner and lowered the earflaps of his otter cap. He shut his eyes.

“On either side of him sat characters of a modern sort. On one side, asleep with his mouth wide open, was a rich horse dealer with a gold pocket-watch chain with charms, and a triple chin. On the other side was some damn artilleryman, a sergeant at arms in any case, most certainly a fellow of the law and money. He wasn’t sleeping. He was staring fixedly at the third copper button on the redingote across from him. He looked like he couldn’t tell a hawk from a handsaw.

“On my side, there were two other men, the one with the copper button and some wiseacre in a smock.

Next to the wiseacre, a young village woman had unbuttoned her blouse to breastfeed a chubby infant, so greedy that he sucked in through his nostrils the milk that was spilling out of his mouth. And the milk was spilling out of his mouth because he was grunting. And he was grunting because he was choking on the milk he sucked in through his nose. He was in a rage! He was biting his wet nurse. A breast is sensitive. I like children well enough, but I would have slapped that one good and hard!

"With his earflaps down and his eyes closed, Langlois looked exactly like a man they stick in front of a church door to incite us to confess our sins.

"We had a bite to eat near Agnères. We arrived in Grenoble at six in the evening.

"I hadn't been in that city for more than fifteen years. I didn't recognize it. I peered left and right as we trotted down the streets up to the Place de France, which was the end of the line for the coach. I had a knot in my stomach and a lump in my throat. I felt like I was slipping back into bad habits and losing the good scent of freedom. If I'd been on foot and by myself, I wouldn't have been able to take it, being locked up again between the four walls of those streets. I wasn't used to such tall houses anymore and I felt like I was suffocating.

"When the carriage stopped on the square, I was the last to get out.

" 'Hold on, my knees are creaking,' I said to Langlois. 'I'm stiff as a board.'

"Truth be told, I was afraid to set foot on the ground.

"The lights were suffocating too. And the noise.

" 'Let me put my arm around you,' said Langlois, and: 'Do you want to drink a glass of champoreau?'

"I wouldn't have gone into that café next to the parcel-delivery office for all the gold in the world.

" 'Come on, then,' I said to him. 'We'll have a drink at the hotel; I know one around here.'

" 'No, you don't,' he said. 'You're a lady. I know one. Come with me.'

"Let's say that I didn't know it, but I did. There was nothing he could do about it.

"It was a nice little hotel on a short backstreet that ended at the Isère quays. It was quite convenient. It faced nothing. I mean, across from the entrance there were no shops to spy from and no fancy houses; there was simply a big garden wall covered with Virginia creeper. You never forget your trade, no matter what it is.

"To my surprise, we were expected. I was even more surprised to see that the bellboy, as he led us to our rooms, didn't stop on the second or third floor; we began climbing the stairs to the fourth floor, and this was a completely different hotel for me; our two rooms were there.

" 'I thought that you might not know this fourth floor,' said Langlois. 'Usually one stops at the second floor, no? I'm telling you, you're a lady.'

"That's how he was. He didn't say anything. He didn't flinch, he paid no attention to you and then, with a single phrase, he made you realize that he knew everything. And that he had a cure for everything.

" 'Hey!' (He held the bellboy back by the tail of his apron.) 'Bring us up two very hot champoreaus.'

" 'This is your room,' he said to me next. 'I believe, if they followed my orders, that it looks out on the trees in the garden.' (He opened the shutters to be sure.) 'Mine is next door. Now, what would you prefer? To dine in town or in one of our rooms?'

" 'Well, this has nothing to do with anything,' I said, 'but do you think that if Madame Tim lived here, she would welcome me the way she does in Saint-Baudille?'

" 'This also has nothing to do with anything,' he said, 'but go dress up a bit. We'll dine in town.'

"And he went to his room.

"What that man called 'dining in town' was putting on his opera hat that kicked everyone's ass and heading out to the grandest restaurant on Place Grenette. In my whole life I'd never set foot in there or even imagined it was possible; you had to be from a different class. There were entire crews in front of the door and, in the gaslight, the gleaming room we entered was nothing but waving fans, feather boas, aigrettes, shirtfronts, and the popping of good bottles. I glimpsed plunging, heart-shaped necklines, throats studded with pearls, and the kind of gold-white shoulders that require at least three generations of breakfast in bed before they can emerge with such perfection out of a ruffled blouse.

"With Langlois, however, you didn't have to be beautiful, or young, or rich to be someone; you just had to be with him. One thing I do know is how to read waiters: whether they don't give a damn about their clients or whether they are scared to death. The maître d' who greeted us and escorted us to the table Langlois had selected was plainly scared to death, so that by comparison everyone in our wake looked totally at ease and even slightly admiring. And there were women I would have envied to no end, even back at the time of my *admirable beauty*.

"It was lovely: consommé à l'ancienne, lobster à la Roscoff, chicken royal and à la Giscours, grilled shad, meringues à la crème, dessert, champagne.

“And a cigar.

“I would gladly have smoked one. Not one of those stogies that had made me want to vomit in the back rooms. No, I would gladly have smoked a fine cigar, right there, like a good belch among all those women pecking at their food like birds. But I was careful not to say so. He would have encouraged me. And I would have done it.

“ ‘You smoke cigars?’ I asked him.

“ ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It’s much better than a pipe for some things. I’m going to have four or five boxes brought up.’

“A little later (we were about to leave), I said to him, with a glance out of the corner of my eye at the floozies decked out in their ostrich feathers, ‘You could have your pick, you know. . .’

“ ‘They would be too shocked,’ he answered.

“On the empty streets that led back to the hotel, something—maybe the champagne, maybe my former life—something made me ask, ‘Shocked at what?’

“ ‘My scruples,’ he said.

“I didn’t sleep a wink. I drew up my battle plan and by morning I was armed to the teeth. ‘In the first place,’ I said to myself, ‘my ideas are good and, then, so are my personal connections.’

“I gave my morning over to the ideas. My idea was to take an innocent stroll around the student quarter and the theater on the Place Bayard. But before eleven I realized my ideas were no good at all.

“When it comes to the ‘housewives’ I met in those neighborhoods, there’s no fooling me. I’m sure they had what it took as *a matter of substance*, as they say in court, and even of *good looks*, but as for *brains* . . . Those women were too smart, having rubbed shoulders with *intelligence*, don’t you know! They thought very highly of themselves! They would have everything figured out the moment they got undressed; we couldn’t wait until then, and we didn’t want to resort to *gelée de veau*. So much for my ideas.

“As for my personal connections, well, that would mean seeing old girlfriends and talking about my former life, which had no appeal at all. But then, as always, what must be done must be done; all’s fair in love and war; desperate times call for desperate measures. I went through a whole series of these old saws before knocking on the first door.

“In the end, the first step is the hardest. I actually enjoyed running around town. Grenoble was less frightening than it had been the previous day. I was as shrewd as I’d always been. That made me happy. I said to myself, ‘You’ll be up to the task. If that rare pearl exists, you’ll get her.’

“I’m skipping over a lot of things. I drank at least twenty cups of coffee; as good as the ones we know how to make. At around four in the afternoon, I got an address; off I go. I’d been told, ‘You don’t need to put on kid gloves.’

“I ring. A young soubrette opens the door, looking a little put out to see I’m a woman. I say to myself, ‘Get to work, girl, you’re paid by the day.’

“ ‘Who are you looking for?’

“ ‘Excuse me,’ I say, and I’m in.

“It was very tidy, appealing even, with little chocolate-box knickknacks here and there. Those things don’t lie. Very telling clues. Especially in the shrewd state I was in.

“Then I see the lady. And, while I’m spouting some little compliment by way of introduction, I walk slowly toward the armchair. I say to myself, ‘It’ll be her or no one.’

“You couldn’t have dreamed of anyone better.

“She was more than presentable: a fine piece of work. Ten minutes of conversation: she’s magnificent. Good enough to offer as a gift to a child. I make a few thrusts to see if an instinctive parry won’t reveal her true nature. She was that sort of neat, pretty woman who would’ve sobbed if you’d called her the sharpest knife in the drawer. Her age? I knew how old she was, but I still called her ‘my child.’

“ ‘What’s your name?’ I asked.

“ ‘Delphine,’ she said.

“I explained the whole business to her very honestly. ‘But why me?’ she asked.

“I told her she’d been highly recommended, that the past was the past, a word to the wise is enough (it was my day for proverbs).

“ ‘He needs to see me though,’ she said (at least she was smart enough to think of that).

“I agreed. I told her that the gentleman would come calling tomorrow at three in the afternoon. As I was leaving, I couldn’t help but add, ‘Have that young girl put on a white apron, my child.’

“Not that the maid’s apron was dirty, mind you: the maid’s apron was flawless. From that day on, however, I’ve always had reason to find fault with everyone and everything.

“The next morning, Langlois knocked at my door. It was seven o’clock.

“ ‘May I come in?’

“ ‘If you don’t mind seeing me in bed.’ (Nothing mattered to me.)

“He comes in.

“ ‘I’ve reserved your seat in the public coach,’ he said. ‘It leaves at eleven.’

“That took my breath away, so he went on: ‘Take care of the Bongalove. The plaster’s dry; the rest can be finished in five days. We’ll arrive a week from today.’

“ ‘But what if she doesn’t fit the bill?’

“He walked me to the coach. He had reserved a corner spot. He settled me in.

“ ‘Don’t stay here,’ I said to him.

“ ‘You’re right,’ he said, ‘I apologize.’

“He walked away with his big, easy stride. I saw him stroll under the trees of the Place Royale, cross the rose garden in front of the Palais, turn a corner, and disappear.

“I must have thought a hundred times about that white apron during my return trip. And a hundred times about Delphine: young, pretty, and whose stupidity had made her wait for everything simply to fall into her lap. Which it did in the end.

“Fortune favors the innocent. That’s easy to say. But when she arrived, I heard that they called her madame commander! A girl from Voiron! For she was simply from nearby Voiron. Nothing rare about her!

“And so? Dark hair and a smooth skin on her, painstakingly preserved from the slightest wrinkle. If there’s anything to be proud of, it’s not that! And that’s how she’s made. How she was made, thank God! And she was being called Madame Commander? Madame Commander of her soup when she’d eaten it, that’s what she was and nothing more.

“They got here on the eighth. She didn’t even realize that on the morning of the ninth, bright and early, Langlois left for the pass where the Piedmontese team was working in the quarry.

“Ever since the weather had taken a turn for the better, we began hearing their explosions again.

“If he could have left on the night of the eighth, he would have; but the coach arrived at six in the evening, and Langlois had to deal with everyone and his brother. That’s why he was nice enough to wait until the following morning.

“And I bet that Delphine got up calmly whenever she was ready, and I bet she was full of good intentions, and I bet that her remarkable intelligence went as far as saying to herself, ‘I’ll just straighten up his cigar boxes.’ And I bet that innocent girl fortune had favored sweetly placed his boxes of cigars on either side of the mirror above the mantel in the dining room: four on one side, four on the other.

“I can just see her. I bet she stepped back to admire the visual effect of the labels.

“Cigars! He had spoken to me about them in Grenoble, in that restaurant full of ostrich feathers, and at a time when Delphine didn’t have two beans to rub together. Madame Commander! Whatever did she have to command, that one?

“As for the mine blasts, well before we left for Grenoble they had begun going off up there near the pass. But how was I supposed to know that Langlois was listening to them and not something else? From the time he took the coach with me, could *I* possibly have imagined *his scruples*?

“I know you’ll say, ‘You chose Delphine and chose your role. Just look at Madame Tim and the prosecutor. From that point on, they remained at a *respectable distance*.’

“Fine. The prosecutor, Madame Tim, and I could go walking arm in arm, but that didn’t mean we were on the same side of the barricade.

“I happen to be ill-mannered. I don’t know how to leave well enough alone, even if it’s a question of respect. And then, well, respect . . . do we respect the people we love?

“I didn’t choose my role. Being forced by circumstances to do something is not what I call ‘choosing.’ I was carrying the weight of my seventy years on my back. Literally on my back.

“I chose Delphine, I’ll grant you that.

“And, yes, I know, she was a woman perfectly incapable of seeing in a box of cigars anything but a box of cigars. I should have suspected that. Well, I didn’t just suspect. I knew.

“I have no reason to find fault with her, no more than I had reason to find fault with her maid’s white apron, which was very white, even a bit starched, with an adorable little flap with fluted ruching. Do you think I didn’t know that either? It was as plain as the nose on your face!

“What fault could anyone find with Delphine? She wasn’t an ‘embroiderer.’ Not in the least. Hadn’t she accepted the plastered walls, the bed, and the two chairs, and even the linen curtain that Madame Tim gave them and that Langlois took down and put away in the cupboard?

“Hadn’t she accepted the table and two chairs in the so-called dining room? And the mirror that Langlois’d had hung above the mantel, saying, ‘I’m sure you’d like to look at yourself on occasion,’ and that reflected the plastered walls?

“Wasn’t she complimentary when the two of them went to visit Madame Tim? And didn’t she walk without saying a word among all those beautiful things in Saint-Baudille, just like someone dancing to music?

“Was she what he wanted? Exactly what he wanted.

“When I came with my knitting, she said to me, ‘What are you doing here?’

“I said, ‘Nothing. I’m knitting, knitting, knitting.’

“ ‘But what will it be in the end? Stockings? A sweater?’

“ ‘No,’ I said. ‘It won’t be anything. I’m just lining up stitches one next to the other, and then stitches one on top of the other. To keep my fingers busy. It might be a muffler or a scarf, or a blanket, depending on how long I need to keep my fingers busy. I don’t plan things ahead of time.’

“Evenings were peaceful. Every evening Langlois would open a box of cigars, take one out, and go smoke it at the back of the garden. Through the window we could see the red tip of his lit cigar coming and going in the night; a night that was too black and in which we could make out the shape of the mountains and the ember of the cigar moving across them like the lamp on a coach traveling through the forest, the valleys, the ridges and peaks; then, suddenly, the mountains disappeared and the coach went on stoically past nothing in the gray night.

“From time to time I would raise my eyes from my knitting to see exactly where he was in his distant voyage; then once again I began to line up stitch after stitch of what could be a scarf, a blanket, or . . . enough. I didn’t need anything. Neither did he. So what did it matter! . . .”

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We remembered that time very well indeed.

The cigars, of course!

But we said to ourselves, “It’s surely to honor his lady. Many young ladies are repulsed by a pipe. Early in a marriage, one makes concessions. Older husbands are always happy to do at least one nice thing without too much effort. Afterwards, things fall into place.” We said to ourselves, “He’ll go back to his pipe.”

It was right after the first snowfall (a dusting of autumn snow that fell on October 20, a very fine layer, but it was enough to turn the whole countryside white, much whiter even than when there was a meter of snow, snow dust that has a sparkle like salt) that Anselmie saw Langlois turn up at her place.

The next day there must have been fifty of us at Anselmie’s, filing through for hours.

We said to her, “So, tell us. What did he say to you? What did he do?”

“He came,” she said.

And it was ages before we could get anything else out of her than “He came.”

That woman is a brute!

Still, we managed to learn a little something. The snow had fallen. The countryside was completely white. Langlois had arrived at Anselmie’s. He didn’t go in. He opened the door and shouted, “Are you there?”

“Of course I’m here,” Anselmie said.

“Come here,” Langlois said.

“Why should I?” Anselmie answered.

“Don’t argue,” Langlois said.

“Can I at least put my leeks in the soup?”

“Hurry,” Langlois said.

“The way he sounded,” Anselmie said to us, “made me drop my leeks and rush out to him.”

“How’d he sound?” we asked her. “Talk. The prosecutor is coming, you know. He’ll get you to talk.”

“Well, what do you want me to say? He was angry!”

“Langlois?”

“Yes. His voice was angry.”

“Fine. So you came out and he was angry?”

“Not at all!”

“So how was he?”

“Like always.”

“No more?”

“No more what? No, like always.”

“He didn’t seem crazy?”

“Him? Oh, you people! Crazy? You’ve no idea! Not at all; he was just like always.”

“He wasn’t nasty?”

“Not at all. I told you he was the way he always was. You know he wasn’t much fun; well, he kept on being not much fun, but barely. He was nice!”

“So what did he say to you?”

“He said, ‘Do you have any geese?’ I said, ‘I might; it depends.’ ‘Go get me one,’ he said. I said, ‘They don’t have much meat on them,’ but he insisted, so I said, ‘Well, come along then.’ We went around the shed and I caught a goose for him.”

She stopped speaking. We were harsh: “Go on, talk!”

“Well . . . that’s all,” said Anselmie.

“What do you mean, that’s all?”

“I mean, that’s all. He said to me, ‘Cut off its head.’ I picked up the cleaver and I cut off the goose’s head.”

“Where?”

“Where what?” she said. “On the chopping block, of course.”

“Where was the chopping block?”

“In the shed, for Pete’s sake.”

“And what was Langlois doing?”

“He was keeping his distance.”

“Where?”

“Outside the shed.”

“In the snow?”

“Oh! There wasn’t much snow.”

“Talk, then!” And we jostled her.

“You’re getting on my nerves,” she said. “I’m telling you, that’s all that happened. If I say that’s all, that’s all, for Pete’s sake. He said to me, ‘Hand it over.’ And I gave him the goose. He held it by the feet. And, well, he watched it bleeding on the snow. When it had bled for a moment, he gave it back to me. He said, ‘Here, take it. And go away.’ And I went back in with the goose. And I said to myself, ‘I suppose he wants me to pluck it.’ So I started to pluck it. And when it was plucked, I looked. He was still in the same spot. Just standing there. He was looking at the goose’s blood at his feet. I said to him, ‘It’s plucked, Monsieur Langlois.’ He didn’t answer me and he didn’t budge. I said to myself, ‘He’s not deaf. He heard you. When he’s ready, he’ll come get it.’ And I made my soup. Five o’clock came. Night was falling. I go out to get some wood. He was still in the same spot. I said to him again, ‘It’s plucked, Monsieur Langlois. You can take it.’ He didn’t budge. So I went in to get the goose to bring it to him but, when I came back out, he was gone.”

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So this is what he must have done. He went back to his place and hung on until right after the soup. He waited for Sausage to take up her knitting and for Delphine to place her hands in her lap. He opened the box of cigars, like he always did, and he went out for a smoke.

Except that night it wasn’t a cigar he smoked but a stick of dynamite. Except that what Delphine and Sausage were looking at as they always had—the small ember, the small coach lamp—was a sizzling fuse.

And, at the back of the garden, there was an enormous golden spray that lit up the night for a second. It was Langlois’s head finally taking on the measure of the universe.

Who is it who said, “A king without diversion is a man full of wretchedness”?

Manosque
September 1–October 10, 1946